

UNIVERSITY OF
ILLINOIS LIBRARY
AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN
STACKS

CENTRAL CIRCULATION BOOKSTACKS

The person charging this material is responsible for its renewal or its return to the library from which it was borrowed on or before the **Latest Date** stamped below. **You may be charged a minimum fee of \$75.00 for each lost book.**

Theft, mutilation, and underlining of books are reasons for disciplinary action and may result in dismissal from the University.

TO RENEW CALL TELEPHONE CENTER, 333-8400

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS LIBRARY AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

MAY 28 1996

MAY 21 1996

DEC 22 2006

When renewing by phone, write new due date below previous due date. L162



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2022 with funding from

University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign Alternates



JEWISH CHILDREN

NEW BORZOI NOVELS
SPRING, 1922

WANDERERS

Knut Hamsun

MEN OF AFFAIRS

Roland Pertwee

THE FAIR REWARDS

Thomas Beer

I WALKED IN ARDEN

Jack Crawford

GUEST THE ONE-EYED

Gunnar Gunnarsson

THE GARDEN PARTY

Katherine Mansfield

THE LONGEST JOURNEY

E. M. Forster

THE SOUL OF A CHILD

Edwin Björkman

CY THEREA

Joseph Hergesheimer

EXPLORERS OF THE DAWN

Mazo de la Roche

THE WHITE KAMI

Edward Alden Jewell

JEWISH CHILDREN

TRANSLATED FROM THE YIDDISH OF

"SHALOM ALEICHEM"

BY HANNAH BERMAN

Rabinowitz
Scholom



NEW YORK

ALFRED · A · KNOOPF

MCMXXII

COPYRIGHT, 1922, BY
ALFRED A. KNOPF, INC.

Published January, 1922

*Set up and printed by the Vail-Ballou Co., Binghamton, N. Y.
Paper furnished by W. F. Etherington & Co., New York, N. Y.
Bound by the H. Wolff Estate, New York, N. Y.*

MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

CONTENTS

	<small>PAGE</small>
A PAGE FROM THE "SONG OF SONGS"	9
PASSOVER IN A VILLAGE. AN IDYLL	20
ELIJAH THE PROPHET	33
GETZEL	38
A LOST "L'AG BEOMER"	50
MURDERERS	58
THREE LITTLE HEADS	71
GREENS FOR "SHEVUOUS"	79
ANOTHER PAGE FROM THE "SONG OF SONGS"	89
A PITY FOR THE LIVING	99
THE TABERNACLE	106
THE DEAD CITRON	119
ISSHUR THE BEADLE	131
BOAZ THE TEACHER	143
THE SPINNING-TOP	153
ESTHER	178
THE POCKET-KNIFE	187
ON THE FIDDLE	210
THIS NIGHT	241

490959

JEWISH CHILDREN

A Page from the “Song of Songs”

Busie is a name; it is the short for Esther-Liba: Libusa: Busie. She is a year older than I, perhaps two years. And both of us together are no more than twenty years old. Now, if you please, sit down and think it out for yourself. How old am I, and how old is she? But, it is no matter. I will rather tell you her history in a few words.

My older brother, Benny, lived in a village. He had a mill. He could shoot with a gun, ride on a horse, and swim like a devil. One summer he was bathing in the river, and was drowned. Of him they said the proverb had been invented: “All good swimmers are drowned.” He left after him the mill, two horses, a young widow, and one child. The mill was neglected; the horses were sold; the young widow married again, and went away, somewhere, far; and the child was brought to us.

The child was Busie.

That my father loves Busie as if she were his own child; and that my mother frets over her as if she were an only daughter, is readily understood. They look upon her as their comfort in their great

Jewish Children

sorrow. And I? Why is it that when I come from "cheder," and do not find Busie I cannot eat? And when Busie comes in, there shines a light in every corner. When Busie talks to me, I drop my eyes. And when she laughs at me I weep. And when she . . .

I waited long for the dear good Feast of Passover. I would be free then. I would play with Busie in nuts, run about in the open, go down the hill to the river, and show her the ducks in the water. When I tell her, she does not believe me. She laughs. She never believes me. That is, she says nothing, but she laughs. And I hate to be laughed at. She does not believe that I can climb to the highest tree, if I like. She does not believe that I can shoot, if I have anything to shoot with. When the Passover comes—the dear good Passover—and we can go out into the free, open air, away from my father and mother, I shall show her such tricks that she will go wild.

The dear good Passover has come.

They dress us both in kingly clothes. Everything we wear shines and sparkles and glitters. I look at Busie, and I think of the "Song of Songs" that I learnt for the Passover, verse by verse:

"Behold, thou art fair, my love; behold, thou art fair; thou hast doves' eyes within thy locks; thy hair is as a flock of goats, that appear from mount Gilead.

"Thy teeth are like a flock of sheep that are even

A Page from The “Song of Songs”

shorn, which come up from the washing; whereof every one bear twins, and none is barren among them.

“Thy lips are like a thread of scarlet, and thy speech is comely; thy temples are like a piece of pomegranate within thy locks.”

Tell me, please, why is it that when one looks at Busie one is reminded of the “Song of Songs”? And when one reads the “Song of Songs,” Busie rises to one’s mind?

•
A beautiful Passover eve, bright and warm.

“Shall we go?” asks Busie. And I am all afire. My mother does not spare the nuts. She fills our pockets. But she makes us promise that we will not crack a single one before the “Seder.” We may play with them as much as we like. We run off. The nuts rattle as we go. It is beautiful and fine out of doors. The sun is already high in the heavens, and is looking down on the other side of the town. Everything is broad and comfortable and soft and free, around and about. In places, on the hill the other side of the synagogue, one sees a little blade of grass, fresh and green and living. Screaming and fluttering their wings, there fly past us, over our heads, a swarm of young swallows. And again I am reminded of the “Song of Songs” I learnt at school:

“The flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land.”

I feel curiously light. I imagine I have wings, and can rise up and fly away.

Jewish Children

• • • •

A curious noise comes from the town, a roaring, a rushing, a tumult. In a moment the face of the world is changed for me. Our farm is a courtyard, our house is a palace. I am a prince, Busie a princess. The logs of wood that lie at our door are the cedars and firs of the "Song of Songs." The cat that is warming herself in the sun near the door is a roe, or a young hart; and the hill on the other side of the synagogue is the mountain of Lebanon. The women and the girls who are washing and scrubbing and making everything clean for the Passover are the daughters of Jerusalem.

Everything, everything is from the "Song of Songs."

I walk about with my hands in my pockets. The nuts shake and rattle. Busie walks beside me, step by step. I cannot go slowly. I am carried along. I want to fly, to soar through the air like an eagle. I let myself go. Busie follows me. I jump from one log of wood to the other. Busie jumps after me. I am up; she is up. I am down; she is down. Who will tire first? "How long is this to last?" asks Busie. And I answer her in the words of the "Song of Songs": "'Until the day break, and the shadows flee away.' Ba! Ba! Ba! You are tired, and I am not."

• • • •

I am glad that Busie does not know what I know. And I am sorry for her. My heart aches for her. I imagine she is sorrowful. That is her nature.

A Page from The “Song of Songs”

She is glad and joyous, and suddenly she sits down in a corner and weeps silently. My mother comforts her, and my father showers kisses on her. But, it is useless. Busie weeps until she is exhausted. For whom? For her father who died so young? Or for her mother who married again and went off without a good-bye? Ah, her mother! When one speaks of her mother to her, she turns all colours. She does not believe in her mother. She does not say an unkind word of her, but she does not believe in her. Of that I am sure. I cannot bear to see Busie weeping. I sit down beside her, and try to distract her thoughts from herself.

I keep my hands in my pockets, rattle my nuts, and say to her:

“Guess what I can do if I like.”

“What can you do?”

“If I like, all your nuts will belong to me.”

“Will you win them off me?”

“We shall not even begin to play.”

“Then you will take them from me?”

“No, they will come to me of themselves.”

She lifts her beautiful blue eyes to me—her beautiful, blue, “Song of Songs” eyes. I say to her:

“You think I am jesting. Little fool, I know certain magic words.”

She opens her eyes still wider. I feel big. I explain myself to her, like a great man, a hero:

“We boys know everything. There is a boy at school. Sheika the blind one, we call him. He is blind of one eye. He knows everything in the world,

Jewish Children

even '*Kaballa*.' Do you know what '*Kaballa*' is?"

"No. How am I to know?"

I am in the seventh heaven because I can give her a lecture on "*Kaballa*."

" '*Kaballa*,' little fool, is a thing that is useful. By means of '*Kaballa*' I can make myself invisible to you, whilst I can see you. By means of '*Kaballa*' I can draw wine from a stone, and gold from a wall. By means of '*Kaballa*' I can manage that we two shall rise up into the clouds, and even higher than the clouds."

To rise up in the air with Busie, by means of "*Kaballa*," into the clouds, and higher than the clouds, and fly with her far, far over the ocean—that was one of my best dreams. There, on the other side of the ocean, live the dwarfs who are descended from the giants of King David's time. The dwarfs who are, in reality, good-natured folks. They live on sweets and the milk of almonds, and play all day on little flutes, and dance all together in a ring, romping about. They are afraid of nothing, and are fond of strangers. When a man comes to them from our world, they give him plenty to eat and drink, dress him in the finest garments, and load him with gold and silver ornaments. Before he leaves, they fill his pockets with diamonds and rubies which are to be found in their streets like mud in ours.

"Like mud in the streets? Well!" said Busie to me when I had told her all about the dwarfs.

"Do you not believe it?"

"Do you believe it?"

A Page from The “Song of Songs”

“Why not?”

“Where did you hear it?”

“Where? At school.”

“Ah! At school.”

The sun sank lower and lower, tinting the sky with red gold. The gold was reflected in Busie's eyes. They were bathed in gold.

•

I want very much to surprise Busie with Sheika's tricks which I can imitate by means of “*Kaballa*.” But they do not surprise her. On the contrary, I think they amuse her. Why else does she show me her pearl-white teeth? I am a little annoyed, and I say to her:

“Maybe you do not believe me?”

Busie laughs.

“Maybe you think I am boasting? Or that I am inventing lies out of my own head?”

Busie laughs louder. Oh, in that case, I must show her. I know how. I say to her:

“The thing is that you do not know what ‘*Kaballa*’ means. If you knew what ‘*Kaballa*’ was you would not laugh. By means of ‘*Kaballa*,’ if I like, I can bring your mother here. Yes, yes! And if you beg hard of me, I will bring her this very night, riding on a stick.”

All at once she stops laughing. A cloud settles on her beautiful face. And I imagine that the sun has disappeared. No more sun, no more day! I am afraid I went a little too far. I had no right to pain her—to speak of her mother. I am sorry for the whole thing. I must wipe it out. I must ask

Jewish Children

her forgiveness. I creep close to her. She turns away from me. I try to take her hand. I wish to say to her in the words of the "Song of Songs": " 'Return, return, O Shulamite!' Busie!" Suddenly a voice called from the house:

"Shemak! Shemak!"

I am Shemak. My mother is calling me to go to the synagogue with father.

To go to the synagogue with one's father on the Passover eve—is there in the world a greater pleasure than that? What is it worth to be dressed in new clothes from head to foot, and to show off before one's friends? Then the prayers themselves—the first Festival evening prayer and blessing. Ah, how many luxuries has the good God prepared for his Jewish children.

"Shemak! Shemak!"

My mother has no time.

"I am coming. I am coming in a minute. I only want to say a word to Busie—no more than a word."

I confess to Busie that I told her lies. One cannot make people fly by means of "Kaballa." One may fly one's self. And I will show her, after the Festival, how I can fly. I will rise from this same spot on the logs, before her eyes, and in a moment reach the other side of the clouds. From there, I will turn a little to the right. You see, there all things end, and one comes upon the shore of the frozen ocean.

A Page from The “Song of Songs”

Busie listens attentively. The sun is sending down its last rays, and kissing the earth.

“What is the frozen sea?” asks Busie.

“You don’t know what the frozen sea is? It is a sea whose waters are thick as liver and salt as brine. No ships can ride on it. When people fall into it, they can never get out again.”

Busie looks at me with big eyes.

“Why should you go there?”

“Am I going, little fool? I fly over it like an eagle. In a few minutes I shall be over the dry land and at the twelve mountains that spit fire. At the twelfth hill, at the very top, I shall come down and walk seven miles, until I come to a thick forest. I shall go in and out of the trees, until I come to a little stream. I shall swim across the water, and count seven times seven. A little old man with a long beard appears before me, and says to me: ‘What is your request?’ I answer: ‘Bring me the queen’s daughter.’”

“What queen’s daughter?” asks Busie. And I imagine she is frightened.

“The queen’s daughter is the princess who was snatched away from under the wedding canopy and bewitched, and put into a palace of crystal seven years ago.”

“What has that to do with you?”

“What do you mean by asking what it has to do with me? I must go and set her free.”

“You must set her free?”

“Who else?”

Jewish Children

"You need not fly so far. Take my advice, you need not."

Busie takes hold of my hand, and I feel her little white hand is cold. I look into her eyes, and I see in them the reflection of the red gold sun that is bidding farewell to the day—the first, bright, warm Passover day. The day dies by degrees. The sun goes out like a candle. The noises of the day are hushed. There is hardly a living soul in the street. In the little windows shine the lights of the festival candles that have just been lit. A curious, a holy stillness wraps us round, Busie and myself. We feel that our lives are fast merging in the solemn stillness of the festive evening.

"Shemak! Shemak!"

My mother calls me for the third time to go with my father to the synagogue. Do I not know myself that I must go to prayers? I will sit here another minute—one minute, no more. Busie hears my mother calling me. She tears her hand from mine, gets up, and drives me off.

"Shemak, you are called—you. Go, go! It is time. Go, go!"

I get up to go. The day is dead. The sun is extinguished. Its gold beams have turned to blood. A little wind blows—a soft, cold wind. Busie tells me to go. I throw a last glance at her. She is not the same Busie. In my eyes she is different, on this bewitching evening. The enchanted princess runs

A Page from The “Song of Songs”

in my head. But Busie does not leave me time to think. She drives me off. I go. I turn round to look at the enchanted princess who is completely merged into the beautiful Passover evening. I stand like one bewitched. She points to me to go. And I imagine I hear her saying to me, in the words of the “Song of Songs”:

“Make haste, my beloved, and be thou like to a roe or to a young hart upon the mountains of spices.”

Passover in a Village

AN IDYLL

Let winds blow. Let storms rage. Let the world turn upside down. The old oak, which has been standing since the creation of the world, and whose roots reach to God-knows-where—what does he care for winds? What are storms to him?

The old tree is not a symbol—it is a living being, a man whose name is Nachman Veribivker of Veribivka. He is a tall Jew, broad-shouldered, a giant. The townspeople are envious of his strength, and make fun of him. "Peace be unto you. How is a Jew in health?" Nachman knows he is being made fun of. He bends his shoulders so as to look more Jewish. But, it is useless. He is too big.

Nachman has lived in the village a long time. "Our 'Lachman,'" the peasants call him. They look upon him as a good man, with brains. They like to have a chat with him. They follow his advice. "What are we to do about bread?" "Lachman" has an almanack, and he knows whether bread will be cheap or dear this year. He goes to the town, and so knows what is doing in the world.

It would be hard to imagine Veribivka without

Passover in a Village

Nachman. Not only was his father, Feitel, born in Veribivka, but his grandfather, Arya. He was a clever Jew, and a wit. He used to say that the village was called Veribivka because Arya Veribivker lived in it, because, before Veribivka was Veribivka, he, Arya Veribivker was already Arya Veribivker. That's what his grandfather used to say. The Jews of those times!

And do you think Arya Veribivker said this for no reason? Arya was not an ordinary man who made jokes without reason. He meant that the catastrophes of his day were Jewish tragedies. At that time they already talked of driving the Jews out of villages. And not only talked but drove them out. All the Jews were driven out, excepting Arya Veribivker. It may be that even the governor of the district could do nothing, because Arya Veribivker proved that according to the law, he could not be driven out. The Jews of those times!

Certainly, if one has inherited such a privilege, and is independent, one can laugh at the whole world. What did our Nachman Veribivker care about uprisings, the limitations of the Pale, of Circulars? What did Nachman care about the wicked Gentile Kuratchka and the papers that he brought from the court? Kuratchka was a short peasant with short fingers. He wore a smock and high boots, and a silver chain and a watch like a gentleman. He was a clerk of the court. And he read all the papers which abused and vilified the Jews.

Jewish Children

Personally, Kuratchka was not a bad sort. He was a neighbour of Nachman and pretended to be a friend. When Kuratchka had the toothache, Nachman gave him a lotion. When Kuratchka's wife was brought to bed of a child, Nachman's wife nursed her. But for some time, the devil knows why, Kuratchka had been reading the anti-Semitic papers, and he was an altered man. "Esau began to speak in him." He was always bringing home news of new governors, new circulars from the minister, and new edicts against Jews. Each time, Nachman's heart was torn. But, he did not let the Gentile know of it. He listened to him with a smile, and held out the palm of his hand, as if to say, "When hair grows here."

Let governors change. Let ministers write circulars. What concern is it of Nachman Veribivker of Veribivka?

Nachman lived comfortably. That is, not as comfortably as his grandfather Arya had lived. Those were different times. One might almost say that the whole of Veribivka belonged to Arya. He had the inn, the store, a mill, a granary. He made money with spoons and plates, as they say. But, that was long ago. Today, all these things are gone. No more inn; no more store; no more granary. The question is why, in that case, does Nachman live in the village? Where then should he live? In the earth? Just let him sell his house, and he will be Nachman Veribivker no more. He will be a dependent, a stranger. As it is, he has at least a corner of his own, a house to live in, and a

Passover in a Village

garden. His wife and daughters cultivate the garden. And if the Lord helps them, they have greens for the summer, and potatoes for the whole winter, until long after the Passover. But, one cannot live on potatoes alone. It is said that one wants bread with potatoes. And when there's no bread, a Jew takes his stick, and goes through the village in search of business. He never comes home empty-handed. What the Lord destines, he buys—some old iron, a bundle of rags, an old sack, or else a hide. The hide is stretched and dried, and is taken to the town, to Abraham-Elijah the tanner. And on all these one either earns or loses money.

Abraham-Elijah the tanner, a man with a bluish nose and fingers as black as ink, laughs at Nachman, because he is so coarsened through living with Gentiles that he even speaks like them.

Yes, coarsened. Nachman feels it himself. He grows coarser each year. Oh, if his grandfather Reb Arya—peace be unto him!—could see his grandson. He had been a practical man, but had also been a scholar. He knew whole passages of the Psalms and the prayers off by heart. The Jews of those times! And what does he, Nachman, know? He can only just say his prayers. It's well he knows that much. His children will know even less. When he looks at his children, how they grow to the ceiling, broad and tall like himself, and can neither read nor write, his heart grows heavy. More than all, his heart aches for his youngest child, who is called Feitel, after his father. He was a clever

Jewish Children

child, this Feitel. He was smaller in build, more refined, more Jewish than the others. And he had brains. He was shown the Hebrew alphabet once, in a prayer-book, and he never again confused one letter with the other. Such a fine child to grow up in a village amongst calves and pigs! He plays with Kuratchka's son, Fedoka. He rides on the one stick with him. They both chase the one cat. They both dig the same hole. They do together everything children can do. Nachman is sorry to see his child playing with the Gentile child. It withers him, as if he were a tree that had been stricken by lightning.

Fedoka is a smart little boy. He has a pleasant face and a dimpled chin, and flaxen hair. He loves Feitel, and Feitel does not dislike him. All the winter each child slept on his father's stove. They went to the window and longed for one another. They seldom met. But now the long angry winter is over. The black earth throws off her cold white mantle. The sun shines; and the wind blows. A little blade of grass peeps out. At the foot of the hill the little river murmurs. The calf inhales the soft air through distended nostrils. The cock closes one eye, and is lost in meditation. Everything around and about has come to life again. Everything rejoices. It is the Passover eve. Neither Feitel nor Fedoka can be kept indoors. They rush out into God's world which has opened up for them both. They take each other's hands, and fly down the hill that smiles at them—"Come

Passover in a Village

here, children!" They leap towards the sun that greets them and calls them: "Come, children!" When they are tired of running, they sit down on God's earth that knows no Jew and no Gentile, but whispers invitingly: "Children, come to me, to me."

They have much to tell each other, not having met throughout the whole winter. Feitel boasts that he knows the whole Hebrew alphabet. Fedoka boasts that he has a whip. Feitel boasts that it is the eve of Passover. They have "*matzos*" for the whole festival and wine. "Do you remember, Fedoka, I gave you a '*matzo*' last year?" "*'Matzo,'*" repeats Fedoka. A smile overspreads his pleasant face. It seems he remembers the taste of the "*matzo*." "Would you like to have some '*matzo*' now, fresh '*matzo*'?" Is it necessary to ask such a question? "Then come with me," says Feitel, pointing up the hill which smiled to them invitingly. They climbed the hill. They gazed at the warm sun through their fingers. They threw themselves on the damp earth which smelled so fresh. Feitel drew out from under his blouse a whole fresh, white "*matzo*," covered with holes on both sides. Fedoka licked his fingers in advance. Feitel broke the "*matzo*" in halves, and gave one half to his friend. "What do you say to the '*matzo*,' Fedoka?" What could Fedoka say when his mouth was stuffed with "*matzo*" that crackled between his teeth, and melted under his tongue like snow? One minute, and there was no more "*matzo*." "All gone?" Fedoka threw his grey eyes at Feitel's blouse as a cat looks

Jewish Children

at butter. "Want more?" asked Feitel, looking at Fedoka through his sharp black eyes. What a question! "Then wait a while," said Feitel. "Next year you'll get more." They both laughed at the joke. And without a word, as if they had already arranged it, they threw themselves on the ground, and rolled down the hill like balls, quickly, quickly downwards.

At the bottom of the hill they stood up, and looked at the murmuring river that ran away to the left. They turned to the right, going further and further over the broad fields that were not yet green in all places, but showed signs of being green soon—that did not yet smell of grass, but would smell of grass soon. They walked and walked in silence bewitched by the loveliness of the earth, under the bright, smiling sun. They did not walk, but swam. They did not swim, but flew. They flew like birds that sweep in the soft air of the lovely world which the Lord has created for all living things. Hush! They are at the windmill which belongs to the village elder. Once it belonged to Nachman Veribivker. Now it belongs to the village elder whose name is Opanas—a cunning Gentile with one ear-ring, who owns a "*samovar*." Opanas is a rich Epicurean. Along with the mill he has a store—the same store which once belonged to Nachman Veribivker. He took both the mill and the store from the Jew by cunning.

The mill went round in its season, but this day it was still. There was no wind. A curious Passover

Passover in a Village

eve without winds. That the mill was not working was so much the better for Feitel and Fedoka. They could see the mill itself. And there was much to see in the mill. But to them the mill was not so interesting as the sails, and the wheel which turns them whichever way the wind blows. They sat down near the mill, and talked. It was one of those conversations which have no beginning and no end. Feitel told stories of the town to which his father had once taken him. He was at the fair. He saw shops. Not a single shop as in Veribivka, but a lot of shops. And in the evening his father took him to the synagogue. His father had "Yahrzeit" after his father. "That means after my grandfather," explained Feitel. "Do you understand, or do you not?"

Fedoka might have understood, but he was not listening. He interrupted with a story that had nothing to do with what Feitel was talking about. He told Feitel that last year he saw a bird's nest in a high tree. He tried to reach it, but could not. He tried to knock it down with a stick, but could not. He threw stones at the nest, until he brought down two tiny, bleeding fledglings.

"You killed them?" asked Feitel, fearfully, and made a wry face.

"Little ones," replied Fedoka.

"But, they were dead?"

"Without feathers, yellow beaks, little fat bellies."

"But killed, but killed!"

Jewish Children

It was rather late when Feitel and Fedoka saw by the sun in the heavens that it was time to go home. Feitel had forgotten that it was the Passover eve. He remembered then that his mother had to wash him, and dress him in his new trousers. He jumped up and flew home, Fedoka after him. They both flew home, gladly and joyfully. And in order that one should not be home before the other, they held hands, flying like arrows from bows. When they got to the village, this was the scene which confronted them:—

Nachman Veribivker's house was surrounded by peasants, men and women, boys and girls. The clerk, Kuratchka, and Opanas the village elder and his wife, and the magistrate and the policeman—all were there, talking and shouting together. Nachman and his wife were in the middle of the crowd, arguing and waving their hands. Nachman was bent low and was wiping the perspiration from his face with both hands. By his side stood his older children, gloomy and downcast. Suddenly, the whole picture changed. Some one pointed to the two children. The whole crowd, including the village elder and the magistrate, the policeman and the clerk, stood still, like petrified. Only Nachman looked at the people, straightened out his back, and laughed. His wife threw out her hands and began to weep.

The village elder and the clerk and the magistrate and their wives pounced on the children.

“Where were you, you so-and-so?”

“Where were we? We were down by the mill.”

Passover in a Village

The two friends, Feitel as well as Fedoka, got punished without knowing why.

Feitel's father flogged him with his cap. "A boy should know." What should a boy know? Out of pity his mother took him from his father's hands. She gave him a few smacks on her own account, and at once washed him and dressed him in his new trousers—the only new garment he had for the Passover. She sighed. Why? Afterwards, he heard his father saying to his mother: "May the Lord help us to get over this Festival in peace. The Passover ought to have gone before it came." Feitel could not understand why the Passover should have gone before it came. He worried himself about this. He did not understand why his father had flogged him, and his mother smacked him. He did not understand what sort of a Passover eve it was this day in the world.

If Feitel's Jewish brains could not solve the problems, certainly Fedoka's peasant brains could not. First of all his mother took hold of him by the flaxen hair, and pulled it. Then she gave him a few good smacks in the face. These he accepted like a philosopher. He was used to them. And he heard his mother talking with the peasants. They told curious tales of a child that the Jews of the town had enticed on the Passover eve, hidden in a cellar a day and a night, and were about to make away with, when his cries were heard by passers-by.

Jewish Children

They rescued him. He had marks on his body—four marks, placed like a cross.

A cunning peasant-woman with a red face told this tale. And the other women shook their shawl-covered heads, and crossed themselves. Fedoka could not understand why the women looked at him when they were talking. And what had the tale to do with him and Feitel? Why had his mother pulled his flaxen hair and boxed his ears? He did not care about these. He was used to them. He only wanted to know why he had had such a good share that day.

“Well?” Feitel heard his father remark to his mother immediately after the Festival. His face was shining as if the greatest good fortune had befallen him. “Well? You fretted yourself to death. You were afraid. A woman remains a woman. Our Passover and their Easter have gone, and nothing.”

“Thank God,” replied his mother. And Feitel could not understand what his mother had feared. And why were they glad that the Passover was gone? Would it not have been better if the Passover had been longer and longer?

Feitel met Fedoka outside the door. He could not contain himself, but told him everything—how they had prayed, and how they had eaten. Oh, how they had eaten! He told him how nice all the Passover dishes were, and how sweet the wine. Fedoka listened attentively, and cast his eyes on Feitel’s blouse. He was still thinking of “*matzo*.”

Passover in a Village

Suddenly there was a scream, and a cry in a high-pitched soprano:

“Fedoka, Fedoka!”

It was his mother calling him in for supper. But Fedoka did not hurry. He thought she would not pull his hair now. First of all, he had not been at the mill. Secondly, it was after the Passover. After the Passover there was no need to be afraid of the Jews. He stretched himself on the grass, on his stomach, propping up his white head with his hands. Opposite him lay Feitel, his black head propped up by his hands. The sky is blue. The sun is warm. The little wind fans one and plays with one's hair. The little calf stands close by. The cock is also near, with his wives. The two heads, the black and the white, are close together. The children talk and talk and talk, and cannot finish talking

Nachman Veribivker is not at home. Early in the morning he took his stick, and let himself go over the village, in search of business. He stopped at every farm, bade the Gentiles good-morning, calling each one by name, and talked with them on every subject in the world. But he avoided all reference to the Passover incident, and never even hinted at his fears of the Passover. Before going away, he said: “Perhaps, friend, you have something you would like to sell?” “Nothing, ‘Lachman,’ nothing.” “Old iron, rags, an old sack, or a hide?” “Do not be offended, ‘Lachman,’ there is nothing. Bad times!” “Bad times? You drank everything,

Jewish Children

maybe. Such a festival!" "Who drank? What drank? Bad times."

The Gentile sighed. Nachman also sighed. They talked of different things. Nachman would not have the other know that he came only on business. He left that Gentile, and went to another, to a third, until he came upon something. He would not return home empty-handed.

Nachman Veribivker, loaded and perspiring, tramped home, thinking only of one problem—how much he was going to gain or lose that day. He has forgotten the Passover eve incident. He has forgotten the fears of the Passover. The clerk, Kuratchka, and his governors and circulars have gone clean out of the Jew's head.

Let winds blow. Let storms rage. Let the world turn upside down. The old oak which has been standing since the creation of the world, and whose roots reach to God-knows-where—what does he care for winds? What are storms to him?

Elijah the Prophet

It is not good to be an only son, to be fretted over by father and mother—to be the only one left out of seven. Don't stand here. Don't go there. Don't drink that. Don't eat the other. Cover up your throat. Hide your hands. Ah, it is not good—not good at all to be an only son, and a rich man's son into the bargain. My father is a money changer. He goes about amongst the shopkeepers with a bag of money, changing copper for silver, and silver for copper. That is why his fingers are always black, and his nails broken. He works very hard. Each day, when he comes home, he is tired and broken down. "I have no feet," he complains to mother. "I have no feet, not even the sign of a foot." No feet? It may be. But for that again he has a fine business. That's what the people say. And they envy us that we have a good business. Mother is satisfied. So am I. "We shall have a Passover this year, may all the children of Israel have the like, Father in Heaven!"

That's what my mother said, thanking God for the good Passover. And I also was thankful. But shall we ever live to see it—this same Passover?

Passover has come at last—the dear sweet Passover. I was dressed as befitting the son of a man

Jewish Children

of wealth—like a young prince. But what was the consequence? I was not allowed to play, or run about, lest I caught cold. I must not play with poor children. I was a wealthy man's boy. Such nice clothes, and I had no one to show off before. I had a pocketful of nuts, and no one to play with.

It is not good to be an only child, and fretted over—the only one left out of seven, and a wealthy man's son into the bargain.

My father put on his best clothes, and went off to the synagogue. Said my mother to me: "Do you know what? Lie down and have a sleep. You will then be able to sit up at the 'Seder' and ask the 'four questions'!" Was I mad? Would I go asleep before the "Seder"?

"Remember, you must not sleep at the 'Seder.' If you do, Elijah the Prophet will come with a bag on his shoulders. On the two first nights of Passover, Elijah the Prophet goes about looking for those who have fallen asleep at the 'Seder,' and takes them away in his bag." . . . Ha! Ha! Will I fall asleep at the "Seder"?" I? Not even if it were to last the whole night through, or even to broad daylight. "What happened last year, mother?" "Last year you fell asleep, soon after the first blessing." "Why did Elijah the Prophet not come then with his bag?" "Then you were very small, now you are big. Tonight you must ask father the 'four questions.' Tonight you must say with father—'Slaves were we.' Tonight, you must eat with us fish and soup and 'Matzo'-balls. Hush, here is father, back from the synagogue."

Elijah the Prophet

“Good ‘Yom-tov’!”

“Good ‘Yom-tov’!”

Thank God, father made the blessing over wine. I, too. Father drank the cup full of wine. So did I, a cup full, to the very dregs. “See, to the dregs,” said mother to father. To me she said: “A full cup of wine! You will drop off to sleep.” Ha! Ha! Will I fall asleep? Not even if we are to sit up all the night, or even to broad daylight. “Well,” said my father, “how are you going to ask the ‘four questions’? How will you recite ‘*Haggadah*’? How will you sing with me—‘Slaves were we’?” My mother never took her eyes off me. She smiled and said: “You will fall asleep—fast asleep.” “Oh, mother, mother, if you had eighteen heads, you would surely fall asleep, if some one sat opposite you, and sang in your ears: ‘Fall asleep, fall asleep’!”

Of course I fell asleep.

I fell asleep, and dreamt that my father was already saying: “Pour out thy wrath.” My mother herself got up from the table, and went to open the door to welcome Elijah the Prophet. It would be a fine thing if Elijah the Prophet did come, as my mother had said, with a bag on his shoulders, and if he said to me: “Come, boy.” And who else would be to blame for this but my mother, with her “fall asleep, fall asleep.” And as I was thinking these thoughts, I heard the creaking of the door. My father stood up and cried: “Blessed art thou who comest in the name of the Eternal.” I looked towards the door. Yes, it was he. He came in so

Jewish Children

slowly and so softly that one scarcely heard him. He was a handsome man, Elijah the Prophet—an old man with a long grizzled beard reaching to his knees. His face was yellow and wrinkled, but it was handsome and kindly without end. And his eyes! Oh, what eyes! Kind, soft, joyous, loving, faithful eyes. He was bent in two, and leaned on a big, big stick. He had a bag on his shoulders. And silently, softly, he came straight to me.

“Now, little boy, get into my bag, and come.” So said to me the old man, but in a kind voice, and softly and sweetly.

I asked him: “Where to?” And he replied: “You will see later.” I did not want to go, and he said to me again: “Come.” And I began to argue with him. “How can I go with you when I am a wealthy man’s son?” Said he to me: “And as a wealthy man’s son, of what great value are you?” Said I: “I am the only child of my father and mother.” Said he: “To me you are not an only child!” Said I: “I am fretted over. If they find that I am gone, they will not get over it, they will die, especially my mother.” He looked at me, the old man did, very kindly, and he said to me, softly and sweetly as before: “If you do not want to die, then come with me. Say good-bye to your father and mother, and come.” “But, how can I come when I am an only child, the only one left alive out of seven?”

Then he said to me more sternly: “For the last time, little boy. Choose one of the two. Either you say good-bye to your father and mother, and

Elijah the Prophet

come with me, or you remain here, but fast asleep for ever and ever."

Having said these words, he stepped back from me a little, and was turning to the door. What was to be done? To go with the old man, God-knows-where, and get lost, would mean the death of my father and mother. I am an only child, the only one left alive out of seven. To remain here, and fall asleep for ever and ever—that would mean that I myself must die. . . .

I stretched out my hand to him, and with tears in my eyes I said: "Elijah the Prophet, dear, kind, loving, darling Elijah, give me one minute to think." He turned towards me his handsome, yellow, wrinkled old face with its grizzled beard reaching to his knees, and looked at me with his beautiful, kind, loving, faithful eyes, and he said to me with a smile: "I will give you one minute to decide, my child—but, no more than one minute."

I ask you. "What should I have decided to do in that one minute, so as to save myself from going with the old man, and also to save myself from falling asleep for ever? Well, who can guess?"

Getzel

“Sit down, and I will tell you a story about nuts.”

“About nuts? About nuts?”

“About nuts.”

“Now? War-time?”

“Just because it’s war-time. Because your heart is heavy, I want to distract your thoughts from the war. In any case, when you crack a nut, you find a kernel.”

His name was Getzel, but they called him Goyetzel. Whoever had God in his heart made fun of Getzel, ridiculed him. He was considered a bit of a fool. Amongst us school-boys he was looked upon as a young man. He was a clumsily built fellow, had extremely coarse hands, and thick lips. He had a voice that seemed to come from an empty barrel. He wore wide trousers and big top-boots, like a bear. His head was as big as a kneading trough. This head of his, “*Reb*” Yankel used to say, was stuffed with hay or feathers. The “*Rebbe*” frequently reminded Getzel of his great size and awkwardness. “Goyetzel,” “Coarse being,” “Bullock’s skin,” and other such nicknames were bestowed on him by the teacher. And he never seemed to care a rap about them. He hid in a

Getzel

corner, puffed out his cheeks, and bleated like a calf. You must know that Getzel was fond of eating. Food was dearer to him than anything else. He was a mere stomach. The master called him a glutton, but Getzel didn't care about that either. The minute he saw food, he thrust it into his mouth, and chewed and chewed vigorously. He had sent to him, to the "*Cheder*," the best of everything. This great clumsy fool was, along with everything else, his wealthy mother's darling—her only child. And she took the greatest care of him. Day and night, she stuffed him like a goose, and was always wailing that her child ate nothing.

"He ought to have the evil eye averted from him," our teacher used to say, behind Getzel's back, of course.

"To the devil with his mother," the teacher's wife used to add, in such a voice, and making such a grimace over her words that it was impossible to keep from laughing. "In Polosya they keep such children in swaddling clothes. May he suffer instead of my old bones!"

"May I live longer than his head," the teacher put in, after her, and pulled Getzel's cap down over his ears.

The whole "*Cheder*" laughed. Getzel sat silent. He was sulky, but kept silent. It was hard to get him into a temper. But, when he did get into a temper, he was terrible. Even an angry bear could not be fiercer than he. He used to dance with passion, and bite his own big hands with his strong white teeth. If he gave one a blow, one felt it—one

Jewish Children

enjoyed it. This the boys knew very well. They had tasted his blows, and they were terribly afraid of him. They did not want to have anything to do with him. You know that Jewish children have a lot of respect for beatings. And in order to protect themselves against Getzel, all the ten boys had to keep united—ten against one. And that was how it came about that there were two parties at “*Reb*” Yankel’s “*Cheder*.” On the one side, all the pupils; on the other, Getzel. The boys kept their wits about them; Getzel his fists. The boys worked at their lessons; Getzel ate continually.

It came to pass that on a holiday the boys got together to play nuts. Playing nuts is a game like any other, neither better than tops, nor worse than cards. The game is played in various ways. There are “holes” and “bank” and “caps.” But every game finishes up in the same way. One boy loses, another wins. And, as always, he who wins is a clever fellow, a smart fellow, a good fellow. And he who loses is a good-for-nothing, a fool and a ne’er-do-well; just as it happens in the big cities, at the clubs, where people sit playing cards night and day.

The ten boys got together in the “*Cheder*” to play nuts. They turned over a bench, placed a row of nuts on the floor, and began rolling other nuts downwards. Whoever knocked the most nuts out of the row won the whole lot. Suddenly the door opened, and Getzel came in, his pockets loaded with nuts, as usual.

Getzel

"Welcome art thou—a Jew!" cried one of the boys.

"If you speak of the Messiah," put in a second.

"*Vive Haman!*" cried a third.

"And Rashi says, 'The devil brought him here.'" cried a fourth.

"What are you playing? Bank? Then I'll play too," said Getzel, to which he got an immediate reply:

"No, with a little cap."

"Why not?"

"Just for that."

"Then I won't let you play."

He didn't hesitate a moment, but scattered the nuts about the floor with his bear's paws. The boys got angry. The cheek of the rascal!

"Boys, why don't you do something?" asked one.

"What shall we do?" asked a second.

"Lets break his bones for him," suggested a third.

"All right. Try it on," cried Getzel. He turned up his sleeves, ready for work.

And there took place a battle, a fight between the two parties. On the one side was the whole "*Cheder*," on the other Getzel.

Ten is not one. It was true they felt what Getzel's fists tasted like. Bruises and marks around the eyes were the portion of the ten. But for that, again, they gave him a good taste of the world with their sharp nails and their teeth, and every other thing they could. From the front and from the back and from all sides, he got blows and kicks

Jewish Children

and pulls and thumps and bites and scratches. Well, ten is not one. They overcame him. Getzel had to get himself off, disappear. And now begins the real story of the nuts.

After he left the "*Cheder*," bruised and scratched and torn and bleeding, Getzel stood thinking for a while. He clapped his hands on his pockets, and there was heard the rattling of nuts.

"You don't want to play nuts with me, then may the Angel of Death play with you. I want you for ten thousand sacrifices. I can manage. We two will play by ourselves."

That was what Getzel said to himself. The next minute he was off like the wind. He stopped in the middle of the road to say aloud, as if there was some one with him:

"Where to? Where, for instance, shall we go, Getzel?" And at once he answered himself: "There, far outside the town, on the other side of the mill. There we shall be alone, the two of us. No one will disturb us. Let any one attempt to disturb us, and we will break bones, and make an end."

Talking with himself, Getzel felt that he was not alone. He was not one but two; and he felt as strong as two. Let the boys dare to come near him, and he would break them to atoms. He would reduce them to a dust-heap. He enjoyed listening to his own words, and did not stop talking to himself, as if he really had some one beside him.

"Listen to me. How far are we going to go?"

Getzel

he asked himself. And he answered himself almost in a strange voice:

“Well, it all depends on you.”

“Perhaps we ought to sit down here and play nuts. Well? What do you say, Getzel?”

“It’s all the same to me.”

Getzel sat down on the ground, far beyond the town, behind the mill, took out the nuts, counted them, divided them in two equal parts, put one lot in his right-hand pocket, and the other in his left. He took off his cap, and threw into it a few nuts from his right-hand pocket. He said to himself:

“They imagine I can’t get on without them. Listen, Getzel, what game are we playing?”

“I don’t know. Whatever game you like.”

“Then let us play ‘odd or even.’”

“I’m quite willing.”

He shook his cap.

“Now, guess. Odd or even? Well, speak out,” he said to himself. He dug his elbow into his own ribs, and said to himself:

“Even.”

“Even did you say? Who’ll thrash you? You have lost. Hand over three nuts.”

He took three nuts from his left-hand pocket, and put them into the right. Again he shook the cap, and again he asked:

“Odd or even this time?”

“Odd.”

“Did you say odd? May you suffer for ever! Hand them over here. You have lost four nuts.”

Jewish Children

He changed four nuts from his left-hand pocket to the right, shook the cap and said again:

"Well, maybe you'll guess right now. Odd or even?"

"Even."

"Even did you say? May your bones rot! You rascal, hand out here five nuts."

"Isn't it enough that I lose. Why do you curse me?"

"Whose fault is it that you are a fool and that you guess as a blind man guesses a hole? Well, say again—odd or even? This time you must be right."

"Even."

"Even? May you live long! Hand out seven nuts, you fool, and guess again. Odd or even?"

"Even."

"Again even. May you be my father! Good-for-nothing, hand over five more nuts, and guess again. Maybe you will guess right for once. Odd or even? Why are you silent—eh?"

"I have no more nuts."

"It's a lie, you have!"

"As I am a Jew, I haven't."

"Just look in your pocket, like this."

"There isn't even a sign of one."

"None? Lost all the nuts? Well, what good has it done you? Aren't you a fool?"

"Enough! You have won all my nuts, and now you torment me."

"It's good, it's all right. You wanted to win all my nuts, and I have won yours."

Goyetzel was well satisfied that Getzel had lost,

Getzel

whilst he, Goyetzel had won. He felt it was doing him good to win. He felt equal to winning all the nuts in the whole world. "Where are they now, the 'Cheder' boys? I would have got my own back from them. I would not have left them the smallest nut, not even for a cure. They would have died here on the ground in front of me."

Getzel grew angry, fierce. He closed his fists, clenched his teeth, and spoke to himself, just as if there was some one beside him.

"Well, try now. Now that I am not by myself. Now that there are two of us. Well, Getzel, why are you sitting there like a bridegroom? Let's play nuts another little while."

"Nuts? Where have I nuts? Didn't I tell you I haven't a single one?"

"Ah, I forgot that you have no more nuts. Do you know what I would advise you, Getzel?"

"For instance?"

"Have you any money?"

"I have. Well, what of that?"

"Buy nuts from me."

"What do you mean by saying I should buy nuts off you?"

"Fool! Don't you know what buying means? Give me money, and I'll give you nuts. Eh?"

"Well, I agree to that."

He took from his purse a silver coin, bargained about the price, counted a score of nuts from the right-hand pocket to the left, and the play began all over again.

An experienced card-player, the story goes, half

Jewish Children

an hour before his death called his son—also a gambler—to his bedside, and said to him:

“My child, I am going from this world. We shall never meet again. I know you play cards. You have my nature. You may play as much as you like, only take care not to play yourself out.”

These words are almost a law. There is nothing worse in the world than playing yourself out. Experienced people say it deprives a man even of his last shirt. It drives a man to desperate acts. And one cannot hope to rise at the Resurrection after that. So people say. And so it happened with our young man. He worked so long, shaking his cap, “odd or even,” taking from one pocket and putting into the other, until his left-hand pocket hadn’t a single nut in it.

“Well, why don’t you play?”

“I have nothing to play with.”

“Again you have no nuts, good-for-nothing!”

“You say I am a good-for-nothing. And I say you are a cheat.”

“If you call me a cheat again, I will give you a clout in the jaw.”

“Let the Lord put it into your head.”

Getzel sat quiet for a few minutes, scraping the ground with his fingers, digging a hole, and muttering a song under his breath. Then he said:

“Dirty thing, let us play nuts.”

“Where have I nuts?”

“Haven’t you money? I will sell you another ten.”

“Money? Where have I money?”

Getzel

"No money and no nuts? Oh, I can't stand it. Ha! ha! ha!"

The laugh echoed over the whole field, and re-echoed in the distant wood. Getzel was convulsed with laughter.

"What are you laughing at, you Goyetzel you?" he asked himself. And he answered himself in a different voice:

"I am laughing at you, good-for-nothing. Isn't it enough that you lost all my nuts on me? Why did you want to go and lose my money as well? Such a lot of money. You fool of fools! Oh, I can't get over it. Ha! ha! ha!"

"You yourself brought me to it. You wicked one of wicked ones! You scamp! You rascal!"

"Fool of the night! If I were to tell you to cut off your nose, must you do it? You idiot! You animal with the horse's face, you! Ha! ha! ha!"

"Be quiet, at any rate, you Goyetzel, you. And let me not see your forbidding countenance."

And he turned away from himself, sat sulky for a few minutes, scraping the earth with his fingers. He covered the hole he had made, as he sang a little song under his breath.

"Do you know what I will tell you, Getzel?" he said to himself a few minutes later. "Let us forgive one another. Let us be friends. The Lord helped me. It was my luck to win so many nuts—may no evil eye harm them! Why should we not enjoy ourselves? Let's crack a few nuts. I should think they are not bad! Well, what do you say, Getzel?"

Jewish Children

"Yes, I also think they ought not to be bad," he answered himself. He thrust a nut into his mouth, a second, a third. Each time, he banged his teeth with his fists. The nut was cracked. He took out a fat kernel, cleaned it round, threw it back in his mouth, and chewed it pleasurable with his strong white teeth. He crunched them as a horse crunches oats. He said to himself:

"Would you also like the kernel of a nut, Getzel? Speak out. Do not be ashamed."

"Why not?"

That was how he answered himself. He stretched out his left hand, but only smacked it with his right.

"Will you have a plague?"

"Let it be a plague."

"Then have two."

And he did not cease from cracking the nuts, and crunching them like a horse. It was not enough that he sat eating and gave none to the other, but he said to him:

"Listen, Getzel, to what I will ask you. How, for example, do you feel while I am eating and you are only looking on?"

"How do I feel? May you have such a year!"

"Ah, I see you've got a temper. Here is a kernel for you."

And Getzel's right hand gave the left a kernel. The right turned upside down. The left hand smacked the right. The left hand smacked the right cheek. Then the right hand smacked the left cheek twice. The left hand caught hold of the

Getzel

right lapel of his coat, and the right hand at once tore off the left lapel, from top to bottom. The left hand pulled the right earlock. The right hand gave the left ear a terrible bang.

“Let go of my earlock, Getzel. Take my advice, and let go of my earlock!”

“A plague!”

“Then you’ll have no earlock, Getzel.”

“Then you, Goyetzel, will have no ear.”

“Oh!”

“Oh! Oh!”

EPILOGUE

For several minutes our Getzel rolled on the ground. Now he lay right side up, and now he lay left side up. He held his pocketful of nuts with both hands. . . . One minute Goyetzel was victorious. The next it was Getzel, until he got up from the ground covered with dirt, like a pig. He was torn to pieces, had a bleeding ear, and a torn earlock. He took all the nuts from his pocket, and threw them into the mud of the river, far away, behind the mill. He muttered angrily:

“That’s right. It’s a good deed.”

“Neither you—nor me.”

A Lost “L’Ag Beomer”

Our teacher, “*Reb*” Nissel the small one—so called on account of his size—allowed himself to be led by the nose by his assistants. Whatever they wanted they got. When the first assistant said the children were to be sent home early that day, he sent them home early. The second assistant said that the boys would turn the world upside down, and ought to be kept at school, and he kept them at school. He could never decide anything for himself. That was why his assistants controlled the school, and not he. At other schools the assistants teach the children to wash their hands and say the blessing. At our school, the assistants would not do this for us, nor fetch us our meals, nor take us to school on their shoulders. No, they liked to go for our meals. They ate them themselves on the road. We did not dare to tell the master of this. The assistants kept us in fear and trembling. If a boy whispered a word of their doings to the teacher, he would be flogged, his skin would be cut. Once, a daring boy told the master something; and the assistant beat him so terribly that he was laid up in bed for months. He warned the boys never to tell the master anything, no matter what the assistants did.

A Lost “L’Ag Beomer”

This period of our schooldays might be called the Tyranny of the Assistants.

And it came to pass that we were under the yoke of the assistants. One year, we had a cold “*L’ag Beomer*.” It was a cold, wet May, such as we sometimes had in our town, Mazapevka. The sun barely showed itself. A sharp wind blew, brought us clouds, tore open our coats, and threw us off our feet. It was not pleasant out of doors.

Just then the assistants took it into their heads to take us for a walk outside the town, so that we might play at wars, with swords and pop-guns and bows and arrows.

It is an old custom amongst Jewish children, to become war-like on the “*L’ag Beomer*.” They arm themselves from head to foot with wooden swords, pop-guns and bows and arrows. They take food with them, and go off to wage war. Jewish children who are the whole year round closed up in small “*Chedorim*,” oppressed by fears of the master, and trembling under the whips of the assistants, when “*L’ag Beomer*” comes round, and they may go out into the open, armed from head to foot, imagine that they are giants who can overcome the strongest foe and reduce the world to ruins. All at once they grow brave. They step forward eagerly, singing songs that are a curious mixture of Yiddish and Russian.

“One, two, three, four!
Jewish children

Jewish Children

Learn the 'Torah,'
Believe in miracles,
Are not afraid.

Hear, O Israel! Nothing matters.
We are not afraid of any one,
Excepting God."

And we carried out the old custom. We took down our swords of last year from the attic, and we made bows from the hoops of old wine barrels. Pop-guns the assistants provided us with, for money, of course—fine guns with which one could shoot flies if they only stood still long enough. In a word, we had all the Jewish weapons to frighten tiny infants to death. And we provided ourselves with food in good earnest, each boy as much as the Lord had blessed him with, and his mother would give him, out of her generosity. We arrived at "*Cheder*" armed from head to foot, and our pockets bulging out with good things—rolls, cakes, boiled eggs, goose-fat, cherry-wine, fruit, fowls, livers, tea and sugar, and preserves and jam, and also many "*groschens*" in money. Each boy tried to show off by bringing the best and the largest quantity. And we wished to please the assistants. They praised us, and said we were very good boys. They took our food and put it into their bags. They placed us in rows, like soldiers, and commanded us.

"Jewish children, take hands, and march across the bridge, straight for Mezritzer fields. There you will meet the sea-cats, and do battle with them."

A Lost "L'Ag Beomer"

"Hurrah for the sea-cats!" we shouted in one voice. We took hands and went forward, like giants, strong and courageous.

• • • •

We called the Free School boys sea-cats because they were short little children in the A B C class. They appeared to us "*Chumash*" boys like flies, ants. We imagined that with one blow—phew! we would make an end of them. We were certain that when they saw us, how we were armed from head to foot with swords and bows and arrows and pop-guns, they would surely fly away. It was no trifle to encounter such giants. You play with "*Chumash*" boys, warriors with long legs!

We had never fought the sea-cats before. But we had every reason to believe, we were convinced, we would conquer these squirrels with a glance, destroy them, make an end of them. Along with giving them a good licking, we would take spoil from them, that is to say, their food, and let them go hungry.

We were so full of our own courage, and so enthusiastic about the brave deeds we were going to do that we pushed each other forward, clapped each other on the shoulder. Then, too, the assistants urged us forward.

"Why do you crawl like insects?" they asked us. They themselves stopped frequently, opened the bags, and tasted our food and cherry-wine, which they praised highly.

"Excellent cherry-wine," they said, passing

Jewish Children

round the bottles, and letting the liquid gurgle down their throats. "Splendid liquor. The best I ever tasted."

That was what the assistants said. They actually licked their fingers. They remained in the distance, but indicated with their hands that we must go forward, forward.

We went on and on, over the wide Mezritzer field, though the wind blew stronger and stronger. The sky grew black with clouds, and a cold, thick rain beat into our faces. Our hands were blue with the cold. Our boots squelched in the mud. We had long given up singing songs. We were tired and hungry, very hungry. We decided to sit down and rest, and have something to eat.

"Where are the assistants? Where is the food—where is it?"

The boys began to murmur against the assistants.

"It is a dirty trick to take all our food from us, and our cherry-wine and our few '*groschens*,' and to leave us here in the desert, cold and hungry. May the devil take them!"

"May a bad end come to the assistants!"

"May the cholera strike down all the assistants in the world!"

"May they be the sacrifices for our tiniest nails!"

"Hush. Let there be silence. Here come our foes, our enemies."

"Little squirrels with big sticks."

"The sea-cats—the sea-cats!"

"Hurrah for the sea-cats!"

A Lost "L'Ag Beomer"

The moment we saw them, we rushed towards them, like fierce starving wolves. We were ready to tear them to pieces. But there happened to us a misfortune, a great misfortune which no one could possibly have foreseen.

If it is not destined, neither wisdom nor strength nor smartness are of any avail. Listen to what can happen.

The sea-cats, though they were small, short little squirrels, were evidently no fools. Before going to do battle on the broad Mezritzer field, they had prepared themselves well at home, gone through their drill. Afterwards, they fed up. They also took with them warm clothing and rubber goloshes. They were armed from head to foot no worse than we were, with swords and pop-guns and bows and arrows. They would not wait until we had taken the offensive. They attacked us first, and began to break our bones. And how, do you think? From all sides at once, and so suddenly that we had no time to look about us. Before we realized it, they were upon us. They were not alone, but had their assistants to urge them on and encourage them.

"Pay out the '*Chumash*' boys. Beat them, the boys with the long legs."

Naturally we were not silent either. We stood up against the squirrels, like giants, beat them with our swords, aimed our arrows at them, and shot at them with our pop-guns. But, alas! our swords

Jewish Children

were dull as wood; and before we could set our bows, they had thrashed us. I say nothing of the guns. What can you do with a pop-gun if the foe will not wait until you have taken aim at him? They rushed forward and knocked the guns out of our hands. What could we do?

We had to throw away our weapons, our swords and pop-guns and bows and arrows, and fight as the Lord has ordained. That is to say, we fought with our fists. But we were hungry and tired and cold, and fought without a plan, because our assistants had remained behind. They let us fight whilst they ate our food and drank our cherry-wine—the devil take them! And they, the little squirrels, well-fed and well-clad, had crept upon us from three sides at once, each moment growing stronger and stronger. They rained down on us blows and thumps and digs. The same blows that we had reckoned on giving them they gave us. And their assistants went in front of them, and never ceased from urging them on.

“Pay back the ‘Chumash’ boys. Beat them, beat them, the boys with the long legs.”

Who was the first to turn his back on the enemy? It would be hard to say. I only know we ran quickly, helter-skelter, back home, back to Mazapevka. And they, the little squirrels—may they burn!—ran after us, shouting and yelling and laughing at us, right on top of us.

“Hurrah! ‘Chumash’ boys! Hurrah! Big boys!”

A Lost “L’Ag Beomer”

We arrived home exhausted, ragged, bruised, beaten. And we giants imagined that our parents would pity us, give us cakes because of the blows we got. But it turned out we were mistaken. No one thought of us. We thanked God we were so fortunate as to escape without beatings from our parents for our torn clothes and twisted boots. But next morning we got a good whipping from our teacher, Nissel the small one, for the bruises we had on our foreheads and the blue marks around our eyes. It is shameful to tell it—we were each whipped in the true style. This was a mere addition, as if we had not had enough.

We were not sorry for anything but that the assistants gave us another share. When a father or a mother beats one, it is out of kindness. When a teacher beats one it is because he is a teacher. And what is his rod for, anyway? But the assistants! Our curses upon them! As if it were not enough that they had eaten all our food, and drunk our cherry-wine—may they suffer for it, Father of the Universe!—as if it were not enough that they had left us to fight alone, in the middle of the field, but when they were whipping us they held our feet, so that we might not kick either.

And that was how our holiday ended up. It was a dark, dreary, lost “*L’ag Beomer*.”

Murderers

“Is he still snoring?”

“And how snoring!”

“May he perish!”

“Wake him up. Wake him up.”

“Leib-Dreib-Obderick!”

“Get up, my little bird.”

“Open your little eyes.”

I barely managed to open my eyes, raise my head, and look about me. I saw a whole crowd of rascals, my school-fellows. The window was open, and along with their sparkling eyes I saw the first rays of the bright, warm early morning sun. I looked about me, on all sides.

“Just see how he looks.”

“Like a sinner.”

“Did you not recognize us?”

“Have you forgotten that it is ‘*L’ag Beomer*’ today?”

The words darted through all my limbs like a flash of lightning. I was carried out of bed by them. In the twinkling of an eye, I was dressed. I went in search of my mother, who was busy with the breakfast and the younger children.

“Mother, today is ‘*L’ag Beomer*.’ ”

Murderers

"A good 'Yom-tov' to you. What do you want?"

"I want something for the party."

"What am I to give you? My troubles? Or my aches?"

So said my mother to me. Nevertheless, she was ready to give me something towards the party. We bargained about it. I wanted a lot. She would only give a little. I wanted two eggs. Said she: "A suffering in the bones!" I began to grow angry. She gave me two smacks. I began to cry. She gave me an apple to quieten me. I wanted an orange. Said she: "Greedy boy, what will you want next?" And my friends on the other side of the window were kicking up a row.

"Will you ever come out, or not?"

"Leib-Dreib-Obderick!"

"The day is flying!"

"Quicker! Quicker!"

"Like the wind."

After much arguing, I got round my mother. I snatched up my breakfast and my share of the party, and flew out of the house, fresh, lively, joyful, to my waiting comrades. All together we flew down the hill to the "*Cheder*."

The "*Cheder*" was full of noise and tumult and shouting that reached to the sky. A score of throats shouted at the one time. The table was covered with delicacies. We had never had such a party as we were going to have that "*L'ag Beomer*." We had wine and brandy, for which we had to

Jewish Children

thank Berrel Yossel, the wine-merchant's son. He had brought a bottle of brandy and two bottles of wine made by Yossel himself. His father had given him the brandy, but the wine he had taken himself.

"What do you mean by saying he took it himself?"

"Don't you understand, peasant's head? He took it from the shelf when no one was looking."

"Gracious me! That means he stole?"

"Fool of the night! Well, what then?"

"What do you mean? Then he is a thief?"

"For the sake of the party, fool."

"Is it a good deed to steal for that?"

"Certainly. What do you say to the wise one of the 'Four questions'?"

"Where is it written?"

"He wants us to tell him where it is written?"

"Tell him it is written in the Book of Jests."

"In the chapter called 'And he took.' "

"Beginning with the words 'Bim-bom.' "

"Ha! ha! ha!"

"Hush, children, Mazeppa comes."

All at once there was silence. We were sitting around the table quiet as lambs, like angels, golden children who could not count two, and whose souls were innocent.

Mazeppa was the teacher's name. That is to say, his real name was Baruch-Moshe. He had come to our town from Mazapevka not long before, and the people called him the Mazapevkar. We

Murderers

boys shortened his name to Mazeppa. And when pupils crown their teacher with such a lovely name, he must be worthy of it. Let me introduce him.

He is small, thin, dried-up, hideously ugly. He hasn't even the signs of a moustache or beard or eyebrows. Not because he shaved. God forbid, but simply because they would not grow. But for that again he had a pair of lips and a nose. Oh, what a nose! It was curved like a ram's horn And he had a voice like a bull. He growled like a lion. Where did such a creature get such a terrible roar? And where did he get so much strength? When he took hold of you by the hand with his cold, bony fingers, you saw the next world. When he boxed your ears, you felt the smart for three days on end. He hated arguing. For the least thing, guilty or not guilty, he had one sentence: "Lie down."

"'Rebbe,' Yossel-Yakov-Yossels thumped me."

"Lie down."

"'Rebbe,' it's a lie. He first kicked me in the side."

"Lie down."

"'Rebbe,' Chayim-Berrel Lippes put out his tongue at me."

"Lie down."

"'Rebbe,' it's a lie of lies. He made a noise at me."

"Lie down."

And you had to lie down. Nothing would avail you. Even Elya the red one, who is already "*Bar-mitzvah*," and is engaged to be married, and wears

Jewish Children

a silver watch—do you think he is never flogged? Oh yes! And how? Elya says he will be avenged for the foggings he gets. Some day or other he will pay back the "*Rebbe*" in such a way that his children's children will remember it. That's what Elya says after each flogging. And we echo his words.

"Amen! May it be so! From your mouth into God's ears!"

.....

We said our prayers with the teacher, as usual. (He never let us pray by ourselves because he thought we might skip more than half the prayers.) Mazeppa said to us in his lion's roar:

"Now, children, wash your hands and sit down to the party. After grace I will let you go for a walk."

We used to hold our "*L'ag Beomer*" party outside the town, in the open air, on the bare earth, under God's sky. We used to throw crumbs of bread to the birds. Let them also know that it is "*L'ag Beomer*" in the world. But one does not argue with Mazeppa. When he told one to sit down, one sat down, lest he might tell one to lie down.

"Eat in peace," he said to us, after we had pronounced the blessing.

"Come and eat with us," we replied out of politeness.

"Eat in health," he said. "I do not wish to eat yet. But, if you like, I will make a blessing over the wine. What have you in that bottle? Brandy?" he asked, and stretched out his long,

Murderers

dried-up hand with its bony fingers to the bottle of brandy. He poured out a glassful, tasted it, and made such a grimace that we must have been stronger than iron to control ourselves from exploding with laughter.

“Whose is this terrible thing?” he asked, taking another drop. “It’s not a bad brandy.” He filled a third glass and drank our health.

“Long life to you, children. May God grant that we be alive next year, and—and . . . Haven’t you anything to bite? Well, in honour of ‘*L’ag Beomer*’ I will wash my hands and eat with you.”

What is wrong with our teacher? He’s not the same Mazeppa. He is in good humour, and talkative. His cheeks are shining; his nose is red; and his eyes are sparkling. He eats and laughs and points to the bottle of wine.

“What sort of wine have you there? Passover wine?” (He tasted it and pursed up his lips.) “P-s-ss! The best wine in the world.” (He drank more.) “It’s a long time since I tasted such wine.” (To Yossel the wine-merchant’s son, with a laugh.) “The devil take your father’s cellar. I saw there barrels upon barrels. And of the finest raisins. Ha! ha! To your health, children. May the Lord help you to be honest, pious Jews, and may you—may you open the second bottle. Take glasses and drink to long life. May God grant that—that—” (He licked his lips. His eyes were closing.) “All good to the children of Israel.”

Jewish Children

Having eaten and said grace, Mazeppa turned to us, his tongue failing him as he spoke:

“Then we have carried out the duty of eating together on ‘*L’ag Beomer*.’ Well, and what next, eh?”

“Now we will go for the walk.”

“For the walk, eh? Excellent. Where do we go?”

“To the black forest.”

“Ha? To the black forest? Excellent. I go with you. It is good to walk in a forest, very healthy, because a forest . . . Well, I will explain to you what a forest is.”

We went off with our teacher, beyond the town. We were not altogether comfortable having him with us. But, shah! The teacher walked in the middle, waving his hands and explaining to us what a forest was.

“The nature of the forest, you must know, is as the Lord has created it. It is full of trees. On the trees are branches; and the branches are covered with leaves that give out a pleasant, pungent odour.”

As he spoke, he sniffed the air that was not yet either pleasant or pungent.

“Well, why are you silent?” he asked. “Say something nice. Sing a song. Well, I was also a boy once, and mischievous like you. I also had a teacher. Ha! ha!”

That Mazeppa had once been a mischievous boy and had had a teacher we could not believe. It was curious. Mazeppa playful? We exchanged

Murderers

glances, and giggled softly. We tried to imagine Mazeppa playful and having a teacher. And did his teacher also——? We were afraid to think of such a thing. But Elya stopped to ask a question:

“‘*Rebbe*,’ did your teacher also flog you as you flog us?”

“What? And what sort of foggings? Ha! ha!”

We looked at the teacher and at each other. We understood one another. We laughed with him, until we were far from the town, in the broad fields, close to the forest.

The fields were beautiful—a Garden of Eden. Green, fragrant grass, white boughs, yellow flowers, green flies, and above us the blue sky that stretched away endlessly. Facing us was the forest in holiday attire. In the trees the birds hopped, twittering, from branch to branch. They were welcoming us on the dear day of “*L’ag Beomer*.” We sought shelter from the burning rays of the sun under a thick tree. We sat down on the ground in a row, the “*Rebbe*” in the middle.

He was worn out. He threw himself on the ground, full-length, his face upwards. His eyes were closing. He could hardly manage to speak.

“You are dear, golden children. . . . Jewish children. . . . Saints. . . . I love you, and you love me. . . . Oh yes, you l-love me?”

“Like a pain in the eyes,” replied Elya.

“Well, I know you l-love me,” went on the teacher.

Jewish Children

"May the Lord love you as we do," said Elya.
We were frightened, and whispered to Elya:
"The Lord be with you!"

"Fools!" he said with a laugh. "What are you afraid of? Don't you see he is drunk?"

"What?" queried the teacher, one of whose eyes was already closed. "What are you saying? Saints? Of course. . . . The guardian of Israel. Hal! Hal! Hal! Rrrssss!"

And our teacher fell fast asleep. The snores burst from his nose like the blasts from a ram's horn, sounding far into the forest. We sat around him, and our hearts grew heavy.

Is this our teacher? Is this he whose glances we fear? Is this Mazeppa?

• • • •

"Children," said Elya to us, "why are we sitting like lumps of stone? Let us think of a punishment for Mazeppa."

A great fear fell upon us.

"Fools, what are you afraid of?" he went on.
"He is now like a dead body, a corpse."

We trembled still more. Elya went on:

"Now we may do with him what we like. He flogged us the whole winter, as if we were sheep. Let us take revenge of him this once, at least."

"What would you do to him?"

"Nothing. I will only frighten him."

"How will you frighten him?"

"You shall soon see." And he got up from the

Murderers

ground. He went over to the teacher, took off his leather strap and said to us:

"See, we will fasten him to the tree with his own belt in such a way that he will not be able to free himself. Then one of us will go over to him and shout in his ear: "*'Rebbe'*, murderers!"

"What will happen?"

"Nothing. We will run away, and he will shout, 'Hear, O Israel!'"

"How long will he shout?"

"Until he gets used to it."

Without another word, Elya tied the "*Rebbe*" to the tree by the hands. We stood looking on, and a shudder passed over our bodies.

Is this our teacher? Is this he whose glances we fear? Is this Mazeppa?

"Why do you stand there like clay images?" said Elya to us. "The Lord has performed a miracle. Mazeppa has fallen into our hands. Let us dance for joy."

We took hands and danced around the sleeping Mazeppa like savages. We danced and leaped and sang like lunatics.

We stopped. Elya bent over the sleeping teacher and shouted into his ear in a voice to waken the dead:

"Help, '*Rebbe*'! Murderers! Murderers! Murderers!"

• • • • • • • • • • •
We flew off together, like arrows from bows. We were afraid to stop a moment. We were even

Jewish Children

afraid to look around us. A great dread fell upon us, even upon Elya, although he never ceased from shouting at us:

“Donkeys, fools, animals! Why do you run?”

“Why do you run?”

“When you run I run too.”

We got into the town full of excitement, and still shouting:

“Murderers! Murderers!”

When the people saw us running, they ran after us. Seeing them running another crowd ran after them.

“Why are you running?”

“How are we to know? Others run, and we run too.”

After some time, one of our boys stopped. And seeing him, we also stopped, but still shouted:

“Murderers! Murderers! Murderers!”

“Where? Where? Where?”

“There, in the black forest, murderers beset us. They bound our teacher to a tree, and God knows if he is still alive.”

• • • • • • •

If you envy us because we are free, because we do not go to “*Cheder*” (the “*Rebbe*” is lying ill), it is for nothing—for nothing. No one knows whom the shoe pinches—no one. No one knows who the real murderers are. We rarely see one another. When we meet, the first words are: “How is the teacher?” (He is no more Mazeppa.) And when

Murderers

we pray, we ask God to save the teacher. We weep in silence: "Oh, Father of the Universe! Father of the Universe!" And Elya? Don't ask about him. May the devil take him—that same Elya!

EPILOGUE

When the "*Rebbe*" recovered (he was ill six weeks, in the height of fever, and babbled constantly of murderers) and we went back to "*Cheder*," we hardly recognized him, so greatly had he changed. What had become of his lion's roar? He had put away his strap, and there was no more "Lie down," and no more Mazeppa. On his face there was to be seen a gentle melancholy. A feeling of regret stole into our hearts. And Mazeppa suddenly grew dear to us, dear to our souls. Oh, if he had only scolded us! But it was as if nothing had happened. Suddenly, he stopped us in the middle of the lesson, and asked us to tell him again the story of that "*L'ag Beomer*" day, and of the murderers in the forest. We did not hesitate, but told him again and again the story we knew off by heart—how murderers had come upon us in the forest, how they fell upon him, tied him to the tree, and were going to kill him with a knife, and how we rushed excitedly into the town, and by our shouting and clamours saved him.

The "*Rebbe*" listened to us with closed eyes. Then he sighed, and asked us suddenly:

Jewish Children

“Are you quite sure they were murderers?”

“What else were they?”

“Perhaps bandits?”

And the teacher's eyes sought the distance. And we imagined that a curiously cunning smile was hovering around his thick lips.

Three Little Heads

If my pen were an artist's brush, or at the very least a photographic camera, I would create for you, my friend, a picture, for a present in honour of "*Shevuous*," of a rare group of three pretty little heads, of three poor naked, barefoot Jewish children. All three little heads are black, and have curly hair. The eyes are big and shiny and burning. They gaze out in wonder, and seem to be always asking of the world the one question: Wherefore? You look at them, and marvel at them, and feel guilty towards them, just as if you were really responsible for them—for the existence of three little superfluous mortals in the world.

The three pretty little heads are of two brothers and a little sister, Abramtzig, Moshetzig, and Dvairke. They were brought up by their father in the true Russian style, petted and spoiled. Their father was Peisa the box-maker. And if he had not been afraid of his wife, Pessa, and if he had not been such a terribly poor man, he would have changed his Jewish name of Peisa into the Russian name of Petya. But, since he was a little afraid of his wife, Pessa, and since he was extremely poor—may it remain far from us!—he kept to his own name of Peisa the box-maker, until the good time comes, when everything will be different, as Bebel says, as

Jewish Children

Karl Marx says, and as all the good and wise people say—when everything, everything will be different. But until the good and happy time comes, one must get up at the dawn of day, and work far into the night, cutting out pieces of cardboard and pasting boxes and covers of books. Peisa the box-maker stands at his work all day long. He sings as he works, old and new songs, Jewish and non-Jewish, mostly gay-sorrowful songs, in a gay-sorrowful voice.

“Will you ever give up singing those Gentile songs? Such a man! And how he loves the Gentiles. Since we have come to this big town, he has almost become a Gentile.”

All three children, Abramtzig, Moshetzig, and Dvairke, were born and brought up in the same place—between the wall and the stove. They always saw before them the same people and the same things: the gay father who cut cardboards, pasted boxes, and sang songs, and the careworn, hollow-cheeked mother who cooked and baked, and rushed about, and was never finished her work. They were always at work, both of them—the mother at the stove, and the father at the cardboards. What were all the boxes for? Who wanted so many boxes? Is the whole world full of boxes? That was what the three little heads wanted to know. And they waited until their father had a great pile of boxes ready, when he would take them on his head and in his arms—thousands of them—to the market. He came back without the boxes, but with money for the mother, and with cakes and buns for the children. He was a good father—such a good

Three Little Heads

father. He was gold. The mother was also gold, but she was cross. One got a smack from her sometimes, a dig in the ribs, or a twist of an ear. She does not like to have the house untidy. She does not allow the children to play "fathers and mothers." She forbids Abramtzig to pick up the pieces of cardboard that have fallen to the floor, and Moshetzig to steal the paste from his father, and Dvairke to make bread of sand and water. The mother expects her children to sit still and keep quiet. It seems she does not know that young heads will think, and young souls are eager and restless. They want to go. Where? Out of doors, to the light. To the window—to the window.

There was only one window, and all three heads were stuck against it. What did they see out of it? A wall. A high, big, grey, wet wall. It was always and ever wet, even in summer. Does the sun ever come here? Surely the sun comes here sometimes, that is to say, not the sun itself, but its reflection. Then there is a holiday. The three beautiful heads press against the little window. They look upwards, very high, and see a narrow blue stripe, like a long blue ribbon.

"Do you see, children?" says Abramtzig. He knows. He goes to "*Cheder*." He is learning "*Kometz Aleph*." The "*Cheder*" is not far away, in the next house, that is to say, in the next room. Ah, what stories Abramtzig tells about the "*Cheder*!" He tells how he saw with his own eyes—may he see all that is good!—a big building,

Jewish Children

with windows from top to bottom. Abramtzig swears that he saw—may he see all that is good!—a chimney—a high chimney from which there came out smoke. Abramtzig tells that he saw with his own eyes—may he see all that is good!—a machine that sewed without hands. Abramtzig tells that he saw with his own eyes—may he see all that is good!—a car that went along without horses. And many more wonderful things Abramtzig tells from the “*Cheder*.” And he swears, just as his mother swears—that he may see all that is good. And Moshetzig and Dvairke listen to him and sigh. They envy Abramtzig because he knows everything—everything.

For instance, Abramtzig knows that a tree grows. It is true he never saw a tree growing. There are no trees in the street—none. But he knows—he heard it at “*Cheder*”—that fruit grows on a tree, for which reason one makes the blessing—“Who hast created the fruit of the tree.” Abramtzig knows—what does he not know?—that potatoes and cucumbers and onions and garlic grow on the ground. And that’s why one says the blessing over them—“Who hast created the fruit of the ground.” Abramtzig knows everything. Only he does not know how and by what means things grow, because, like the other children, he never saw them. There is no field in their street, no garden, no tree, no grass—nothing—nothing. There are big buildings in their street, grey walls and high chimneys that belch out smoke. Each building has a lot of windows, thousands and thou-

Three Little Heads

sands of windows, and machines that go without hands. And in the streets there are cars that go without horses. And beyond these, nothing—nothing.

Even a little bird is seldom seen here. Sometimes an odd sparrow strays in—grey as the grey walls. He picks, picks at the stones. He spreads out his wings and flies away. Fowls? The children sometimes see the quarter of one with a long, pale leg. How many legs has a fowl? "Four, just like a horse," explains Abramtzig. And surely he knows everything. Sometimes their mother brings home from the market a little head with glassy eyes that are covered with a white film. "It's dead," says Abramtzig, and all three children look at each other out of great black eyes; and they sigh.

Born and brought up in the big city, in the huge building, in the congestion, loneliness and poverty, not one of the three children ever saw a living creature, neither a fowl, nor a cow, nor any other animal, excepting the cat. They have a cat of their own—a big, live cat, as grey as the high damp grey wall. The cat is their only play-toy. They play with it for hours on end. They put a shawl on her, call her "the wedding guest," and laugh and laugh without an end. When their mother sees them, she presents them—one with a smack, a second with a dig in the ribs, and the third with a twist of the ear. The children go off to their hiding-place behind the stove. The eldest, Abramtzig, tells a story, and the other two, Moshetzig and Dvairke,

Jewish Children

listen to him. He says their mother is right. They ought not to play with the cat, because a cat is a wicked animal. Abramtzig knows everything. There is nothing in the world that he does not know.

• • •

Abramtzig knows everything. He knows there is a land far away called America. In America they have a lot of relatives and friends. In that same America the Jews are well-off and happy—may no evil eye rest on them! Next year, if God wills it, they will go off to America—when they get tickets. Without tickets no one can go to America, because there is a sea. And on the sea there is a storm that shakes one to the very soul. Abramtzig knows everything.

He even knows what goes on in the other world. For instance, he knows that in the other world there is a Garden of Eden, for Jews, of course. In the Garden of Eden there are trees with the finest fruits, and rivers of oil. Diamonds and rubies are to be found there in the streets. Stoop down and pick them up and fill your pockets. And there good Jews study the Holy Law day and night, and enjoy the holiness.

That is what Abramtzig tells. And Moshetzig's and Dvairke's eyes are burning. They envy their brother because he knows everything. He knows everything, even to what goes on in the heavens. Abramtzig swears that twice a year, on the nights of "*Hashono Rabo*" and "*Shevuous*," the sky opens. It is true he himself never saw the

Three Little Heads

sky opening, because there is no sky near them. But his comrades saw it. They swore—may they see all that is good!—And they would not swear to a lie. How can one swear to a lie? It's a pity they have no sky in their street, only a long, narrow blue stripe, like a long, narrow blue ribbon. What can one see in such a tiny scrap of sky, beyond a few stars and the reflection of the moon? In order to prove to his little sister and brother that the sky opens, Abramtzig goes over to his mother, and pulls her by the skirt.

“Mother, is it true that in the very middle of *Shevuous*’ night the sky opens?”

“I will open your head for you.”

When he got no satisfaction from his mother, Abramtzig waited for his father, who had gone off to the market with a treasure of boxes.

“Children, guess what present father will bring us from the market,” said Abramtzig. And the children tried to guess what their father would bring them from the market. They counted on their fingers everything that was in the market—everything that an eye could see, and a heart desire—cakes and buns and sweets. But no one guessed aright. And I am afraid you will not guess aright either. Peisa the box-maker brought from the market this time neither cakes, nor buns nor sweets. He brought the children grass—curious, long, sweet-smelling grass.

And all three children gathered around their father.

“Father, what is it—that?”

Jewish Children

“It is grass.”

“What is grass?”

“It is a bunch of greens for ‘Shevuous.’ Jews need grass for ‘Shevuous.’”

“Where do they get it, father?”

“Where do they get it? H’m! They buy it. They buy it in the market,” said their father. And he strewed the green, sweet-smelling grass over the freshly-swept floor. And he was delighted; it was green and smelt sweet. He said to the mother gaily, as is his way:

“Pessa, good ‘Yom-tov’ to you!”

“Good luck! A new thing! The young devils will now have something to make a mess with,” replied the mother, crossly, as is her way. And she gave one of the children a smack, the second a dig in the ribs, and the third a twist of the ear. She is never satisfied, always cross, and always sour, exactly the opposite of father.

The three pretty heads looked at the mother, and at the father, and at one another. The moment their parents turned away, they threw themselves on the floor, and put their faces to the sweet-smelling grass. They kissed it—the green grass that Jews need for “Shevuous,” and which is sold at the market.

Everything is to be found at the market, even greens. The father buys everything. Jews want everything, even greens—even greens.

Greens for “Shevuous”

On the eve of “*Shevuous*,” I induced my mother—peace be unto her!—to let me go off outside the town, by myself, to gather greens for the Festival.

And my mother let me go off alone to gather the greens for the Festival. May she have a bright Paradise for that!

A real pleasure is a pleasure that one enjoys by one's self, without a companion, and without a single argument. I was alone, free as a bird, in the big cultivated field. Above me was the whole of the blue cap called “the sky.” For me alone shone the beautiful queen of the day, the sun. For my sake there came together, here in the big field, all the singers and warblers and dancers. For my sake there was spread before me the row of tall sunflowers, and the delicate growths were scattered all over the field by a benevolent nature. No one bothered me. No one prevented me from doing what I liked. No one saw me but God. And I could do what I liked. If I liked I might sing. If I liked I might shout and scream at the top of my voice. If I liked I might make a horn with my hands, and blow out a melody. If I liked I might roll on the green grass just as I was, curling myself up like a hedgehog. Who was there to

Jewish Children

give me orders? And whom would I pay heed to? I was free—I was free.

The day was so warm, the sun so beautiful, the sky so clear, the field so green, the grass so fresh, my heart so gay, and my soul so joyful that I forgot completely I was a stranger in the field and had merely come out to cut green boughs for "*Shevuous*." I imagined I was a prince, and the whole field that my eyes rested on, and everything in the field, and even the blue sky above it—all were mine. I owned everything, and could do what I liked with it—I, and no one else. And like an overlord who had complete control of everything, I longed to show my power, my strength, my authority—all that I could and would do.

First of all I was displeased with the tall giants with the yellow hats—the sunflowers. Suddenly they appeared to me as my enemies. And all the other plants with and without stalks, the beans and beanstalks, were enemies too. They were the Philistines that had settled on my ground. Who had sent for them? And those thick green plants lying on the ground, with huge green heads—the cabbages, what are they doing here? They will only get drunk and bring a misfortune upon me. Let them go into the earth. I do not want them. Angry thoughts and fierce instincts awoke within me. A curious feeling of vengefulness took possession of me. I began to avenge myself of my enemies. And what a vengeance it was!

I had with me all the tools I would need for cut-
80

Greens for “Shevuous”

ting the green boughs for the Festival—pocket-knife with two blades, and a sword—a wooden sword, but a sharp one.

This sword had remained with me after “*L'ag Beomer*.” And although I had carried it with me when I had gone with my comrades to do battle outside the town, yet I could swear to you, though you may believe me without an oath, that the sword had not spilled one drop of blood. It was one of those weapons that are carried about in times of peace. There was not a sign of war. It was quiet and peaceful around and about. I carried the sword because I wanted to. For the sake of peace, one must have in readiness swords and guns and rifles and cannon, horses and soldiers. May they never be needed for ill, as my mother used to say when she was making preserves.

It is the same all the world over. In a war, one aims first at the leaders, the officers. It is better still if one can hit the general. After that the soldiers fall like chaff, in any event. Therefore you will not be surprised to hear that, first of all, I fell upon Goliath the Philistine. I gave him a good blow on the head with my sword, and a few good blows from the back. And the wicked one was stretched at my feet, full length. After that I knocked over a good many more wicked ones. I pulled the stalks out of the ground, and threw them to the devil. The short, fat green enemies I attacked in a different manner. Wherever I could, I took the green heads off. The others I trampled

Jewish Children

down with my feet. I made a heap of ashes of them.

During a battle, when the blood is hot, and one is carried away by excitement, one cuts down everything that is at hand, right and left. When one is spilling blood, one loses one's self, one does not know where one is in the world. At such a time, one does not honour old age. One does not care about weak women. One has no pity for little children. Blood is simply poured out like water. . . . When I was cutting down the enemy, I felt a hatred and a malice I had never experienced before, immediately after I had delivered the first blow. The more I killed the more excited I became. I urged myself to go on. I was so beside myself, so enflamed, so ecstatic that I smashed up, and destroyed everything before me. I cut about me on all sides. Most of all the "little ones" suffered at my hands—the young peas in the fat little pods, the tiny cucumbers that were just showing above ground. These excited me by their silence and their coldness. And I gave them such a share that they would never forget me. I knocked off heads, tore open bellies, shattered to atoms, beat, murdered, killed. May I know of evil as little as I know how I came to be so wicked. Innocent potatoes, poor things, that lay deep in the earth, I dug out, just to show them that there was no hiding from me. Little onions and green garlic I tore up by the roots. Radishes flew about me like hail. And may the Lord punish me if I even tasted a single bite of anything. I remembered

Greens for “Shevuous”

the law in the Bible forbidding it. And Jews do not plunder. Every minute, when an evil spirit came and tempted me to taste a little onion or a young garlic, the words of the Bible came into my mind. . . . But I did not cease from beating, breaking, wounding, and killing and cutting to pieces, old and young, poor and rich, big and little, without the least mercy. . . .

On the contrary, I imagined I heard their wails and groans and cries for mercy, and I was not moved. It was remarkable that I who could not bear to see a fowl slaughtered, or a cat beaten, or a dog insulted, or a horse whipped—I should be such a tyrant, such a murderer. . . .

“Vengeance,” I shouted without ceasing, “vengeance. I will have my revenge of you for all the Jewish blood that was spilled. I will repay you for Jerusalem, for the Jews of Spain and Portugal, and for the Jews of Morocco. Also for the Jews who fell in the past, and those who are falling to-day. And for the Scrolls of the Law that were torn, and for the . . . Oh! oh! oh! Help! Help! Who has me by the ear?”

Two good thumps and two good smacks in the face at the one time sobered me on the instant. I saw before me a man who, I could have sworn, was Okhrim, the gardener.

Okhrim the gardener had for years cultivated fields outside the town. He rented a piece of ground, made a garden of it, and planted in it melons and pumpkins, and onions and garlic and rad-

Jewish Children

ishes and other vegetables. He made a good living in this way. How did I know Okhrim? He used to deal with us. That is to say, he used to borrow money off my mother every Passover eve, and about "*Succoth*" time, he used to begin to pay it back by degrees. These payments used to be entered on the inside cover of my mother's prayer-book. There was a separate page for Okhrim, and a separate account. It was headed in big writing, "Okhrim's account." Under these words came the entries: "A '*rouble*' from Okhrim. Another '*rouble*' from Okhrim. Two '*roubles*' from Okhrim. Half a '*rouble*' from Okhrim. A sack of potatoes from Okhrim," and so on. . . . And though my mother was not rich—a widow with children, who lived by money-lending—she took no interest from Okhrim. He used to repay us in garden-produce, sometimes more, sometimes less. We never quarrelled with him.

If the harvest was good, he filled our cellar with potatoes and cucumbers to last us all the winter. And if the harvest was bad, he used to come and plead with my mother:

"Do not be offended, Mrs. Abraham, the harvest is bad."

My mother forgave him, and told him not to be greedy next year.

"You may trust me, Mrs. Abraham, you may trust me," Okhrim replied. And he kept his word. He brought us the first pickings of onions and garlic. We had new potatoes and green cucumbers before the rich folks. I heard our neighbours say,

Greens for “Shevuous”

more than once, that the widow was not so badly off as she said. “See, they bring her the best of everything.” Of course, I at once told my mother what I had heard, and she poured out a few curses on our neighbours.

“Salt in their eyes, and stones in their hearts! Whoever begrudges me what I have, let him have nothing. I wish them to be in my position next year.”

Naturally, I at once told my neighbours what my mother had wished them; and, of course, for these words they were enraged against her. They called her by a name I was ashamed to hear. . . . Naturally I was angry, and at once told my mother of it. My mother gave me two smacks and told me to give up carrying “‘Purim’ presents” from one to the other. The smacks pained, and the words “‘Purim’ presents” gnawed at my brain. I could not understand why she said “‘Purim’ presents.”

I used to rejoice when I saw Okhrim from the distance, in his high boots and his thick, white, warm, woollen pellisse which he wore winter and summer. When I saw him, I knew he was bringing us a sackful of garden produce. And I flew into the kitchen to tell my mother the news that Okhrim was coming.

I must confess that there was a sort of secret love between Okhrim and myself—a sort of sympathy that could not be expressed in words. We rarely spoke to one another. Firstly, because I did not understand his language, that is to say, I under-

Jewish Children

stood his but he did not understand mine. Secondly, I was shy. How could I talk to such a big Okhrim? I had to ask my mother to be our interpreter.

"Mother, ask him why he does not bring me some grapes."

"Where is he going to get them? There are no grapes growing in a vegetable garden."

"Why are there no grapes in a vegetable garden?"

"Because vine trees do not grow with vegetables."

"Why do vine trees not grow with vegetables?"

"Why—why—why? You are a fool," cried my mother, and gave me a smack in the face.

"Mrs. Abraham, do not beat the child," said Okhrim, defending me.

That is the sort of Gentile Okhrim was. And it was in his hands I found myself that day when I waged war against the vegetables.

This is what I believe took place: When Okhrim came up and saw his garden in ruins, he could not at once understand what had happened. When he saw me swinging my sword about me on all sides, he ought to have realized I was a terrible being, an evil spirit, a demon, and crossed himself several times. But when he saw that it was a Jewish boy who was fighting so vigorously, and with a wooden sword, he took hold of me by the ear with so much force that I collapsed, fell to the ground, and screamed in a voice unlike my own:

"Oh! Oh! Oh! Who is pulling me by the ear?"

It was only after Okhrim had given me a few good thumps and several resounding smacks that

Greens for "Shevuous"

we encountered each other's eyes and recognized one another. We were both so astonished that we were speechless.

"Mrs. Abraham's boy!" cried Okhrim, and he crossed himself. He began to realize the ruin I had brought on his garden. He scrutinized each bed and examined each little stick. He was so overcome that the tears filled his eyes. He stood facing me, his hands folded, and he asked me only one solitary question:

"Why have you done this to me?"

It was only then that I realized the mischief I had done, and whom I had done it to. I was so amazed at myself that I could only repeat:

"Why? Why?"

"Come," said Okhrim, and took me by the hand. I was bowed to the earth with fear. I imagined he was going to make an end of me. But Okhrim did not touch me. He only held me so tightly by the hand that my eyes began to bulge from my head. He brought me home to my mother, told her everything, and left me entirely in her hands.

Need I tell you what I got from my mother? Need I describe for you her anger, and her fright, and how she wrung her hands when Okhrim told her in detail all that had taken place in his garden, and of all the damage I had done to his vegetables? Okhrim took his stick and showed my mother how I had destroyed everything on all sides, how I had smashed and broken, and trampled down everything with my feet, pulled the little potatoes out of the

Jewish Children

ground, and torn the tops off the little onions and the garlic that were just showing above the earth.

“And why? And wherefore? Why, Mrs. Abraham—why?”

Okhrim could say no more. The sobs stuck in his throat and choked him.

I must tell you the real truth, children. I would rather Okhrim with the strong arms had beaten me, than have got what I did from my mother, before “*Shevuous*,” and what the teacher gave me after “*Shevuous*.” . . . And the shame of it all. I was reminded of it all the year round by the boys at “*Cheder*.” They gave me a nickname—“The Gardener.” I was Yossel “the gardener.”

This nickname stuck to me almost until the day I was married.

That is how I went to gather greens for “*Shevuous*.”

Another Page from “The Song of Songs”

“Quicker, Busie, quicker!” I said to her the day before the *“Shevuous.”* I took her by the hand, and we went quickly up the hill. “The day will not stand still, little fool. And we have to climb such a high hill. After the hill we have another stream. Over the stream there are some boards—a little bridge. The stream flows, the frogs croak, and the boards shake and tremble. On the other side of the bridge, over there is the real Garden of Eden—over there begins my real property.”

“Your property?”

“I mean the Levada—a big field that stretches away and away, without a beginning and without an end. It is covered with a green mantle, sprinkled with yellow flowers, and nailed down with little red nails. It gives out a delicious odour. The most fragrant spices in the world are there. I have trees there beyond the counting, tall many-branched trees. I have a little hill there that I sit on when I like. Or else, by pronouncing the Holy Name, I can rise up and fly away like an eagle, across the clouds, over fields and woods, over seas and deserts until I come

Jewish Children

to the other side of the mountain of darkness."

"And from there," puts in Busie, "you walk seven miles until you come to a little stream."

"No. To a thick wood. First I go in and out of the trees, and after that I come to the little stream."

"You swim across the water, and count seven times seven."

"And there appears before me a little old man with a long beard."

"He asks you: 'What is your desire?'"

"I say to him: 'Bring me the Queen's daughter.'"

Busie takes her hand from mine, and runs down the hill. I run after her.

"Busie, why are you running off?"

Busie does not answer. She is vexed. She likes the story I told her excepting the part about the Queen's daughter.

· · · · ·
You have not forgotten who Busie is? I told you once. But if you have forgotten, I will tell you again.

I had an older brother, Benny. He was drowned. He left after him a water-mill, a young widow, two horses, and a little child. The mill was neglected; the horses were sold; the widow married again, and went away, somewhere far; and the child was brought to us. This child was Busie.

Ha! ha! ha! Everybody thinks that Busie and I are sister and brother. She calls my mother "mother," and my father "father." And we two

Another Page

live together like sister and brother, and love one another, like sister and brother.

Like sister and brother? Then why is Busie ashamed before me?

It happened once that we two were left alone in the house—we two by ourselves in the whole house. It was evening, towards nightfall. My father had gone to the synagogue to recite the mourners' prayer after my dead brother Benny, and my mother had gone out to buy matches. Busie and I crept into a corner, and I told her stories. Busie likes me to tell her stories—fine stories of "*Cheder*," or from the "*Arabian Nights*." She crept close to me, and put her hand into mine.

"Tell me something, Shemak, tell me."

Softly fell the night around us. The shadows crept slowly up the walls, paused on the floor, and stole all around. We could hardly, hardly see one another's face. I felt her hand trembling. I heard her little heart beating. I saw her eyes shining in the dark. Suddenly she drew her hand from mine.

"What is it, Busie?"

"We must not."

"What must we not?"

"Hold each other's hands."

"Why not? Who told you that?"

"I know it myself."

"Are we strangers? Are we not sister and brother?"

"Oh, if we were sister and brother," cried Busie. And I imagined I heard in her voice the words from

Jewish Children

the "Song of Songs," "O that thou wert as my brother."

It is always so. When I speak of Busie, I always think of the "Song of Songs."

Where was I? I was telling you of the eve of the "*Shevuous*." Well, we ran down hill, Busie in front, I after her. She is angry with me because of the Queen's daughter. She likes all my stories excepting the one about the Queen's daughter. But Busie's anger need not worry one. It does not last long, no longer than it takes to tell of it. She is again looking up at me with her great, bright, thoughtful eyes. She tosses back her hair and says to me:

"Shemak, oh, Shemak! Just look! What a sky! You do not see what is going on all around us."

"I see, little fool. Why should I not see? I see a sky. I feel a warm breeze blowing. I hear the birds piping and twittering as they fly over our heads. It is our sky, and our breeze. The little birds are ours too—everything is ours, ours, ours. Give me your hand, Busie."

No, she will not give me her hand. She is ashamed. Why is Busie ashamed before me? Why does she grow red?

"There," says Busie to me—"over there, on the other side of the bridge." And I imagine she is repeating the words of the Shulamite in the "Song of Songs."

Another Page

“Come, my beloved, let us go forth into the field;
let us lodge in the villages.

“Let us get up early to the vineyards; let us see if
the vine flourish, whether the tender grape appear,
and the pomegranates bud forth.”

And we are at the little bridge.

The stream flows; the frogs croak; the boards of
the little bridge are shaking. Busie is afraid.

“Ah, Busie, you are a—— Why are you afraid,
little fool? Hold on to me. Or, let us take hold
of one another, you of me, and I of you. See?
That’s right—that’s right.”

No more little bridge.

We still cling to one another, as we walk along.
We are alone in this Garden of Eden. Busie holds
me tightly, very tightly. She is silent, but I imag-
ine she is talking to me in the words from the “Song
of Songs”:

“My beloved is mine, and I am his.”

The Levada is big. It stretches away without
a beginning and without an end. It is covered with
a green mantle, sprinkled with yellow flowers, and
nailed down with red nails. It gives out a delicious
odour—the most fragrant spices in the world are
there. We walked along, embraced—we two alone
in the Garden of Eden.

“Shemak,” says Busie to me, looking straight into
my eyes, and nestling still closer to me, “when shall
we start gathering the green boughs for the ‘Shevu-
ous’?”

Jewish Children

“The day is long enough, little fool,” I say to her. I am on fire. I do not know where to look first, whether at the blue sky, or the green fields, or over there, at the end of the world, where the sky has become one with the earth. Or shall I look at Busie’s shining face—into her large beautiful eyes that are to me deep as the heavens and dreamy as the night? Her eyes are always dreamy. A deep sorrow lies hidden within them. They are veiled by a shade of melancholy. I know her sorrow. I am acquainted with the cause of her melancholy. She has a great grief in her heart. She is pained because her mother married a stranger, and went away from her for ever and ever, as if she had been nothing to her. In my home her mother’s name must not be mentioned. It is as if Busie had never had a mother. My mother is her mother, and my father is her father. They love her as if she were their own child. They fret over her, and give her everything that her heart desires. There is nothing too dear for Busie. She wanted to go with me to gather green boughs for the Festival decorations (I told her to ask it), and my father said to my mother:

“What do you think?” He looked over his silver spectacles, and stroked the silver white hair of his beard. And there went on an argument between my father and mother about our going off outside the town to gather green boughs for the “Shevuous.”

Father: “What do you say?”

Mother: “What do you say?”

Another Page

Father: "Shall we let them go?"

Mother: "Why should we not let them go?"

Father: "Do I say we should not?"

Mother: "What then are you saying?"

Father: "I am saying that we should let them go."

Mother: "Why should they not go?"

And so forth. I know what is worrying them. About twenty times my mother warned me, my father repeating the words after her, that there is a bridge to be crossed, and under the little bridge there is a water—a stream, a stream, a stream.

We, Busie and I, have long forgotten the little bridge and the river, the stream. We are going across the broad free Levada, under the blue, open sky. We run across the green field, fall and roll about on the sweet-smelling grass. We get up, fall again, and roll about again, and yet again. We have not yet gathered a single green leaf for the Festival decorations. I take Busie over the length and breadth of the Levada. I show off before her with my property.

"Do you see those trees? Do you see this sand? Do you see that little hill?"

"Are they all yours?" asks Busie. Her eyes are laughing. I am annoyed because she laughs at me. She always laughs at me. I get sulky and turn away from her for a moment. Seeing that I am sulky, she goes in front of me, looks into my eyes, takes my hand, and says to me: "Shemak!" My sulks are gone and all is forgotten. I take her hand

Jewish Children

and lead her to my hill, there where I sit always, every summer. If I like I sit down, and if I like I rise up with the help of the Lord, by pronouncing His Holy Name. And I fly off like an eagle, above the clouds, over fields and woods, over seas and deserts.

We sit on the hill, Busie and I. (We have not yet gathered a single green leaf for the Festival.) We tell stories. That is to say, I tell stories, and she listens. I tell her what will happen at some far, far off time. When I am a man and she is a woman we will get married. We will both rise up, by pronouncing the Holy Name, and travel the whole world. First we will go to all the countries that Alexander the Great was in. Then we will run over to the Land of Israel. We will go to the Hills of Spices, fill our pockets with locust-beans, figs, dates, and olives, and fly off further and still further. And everywhere we will play a different sort of trick, for no one will see us.

"Will no one see us?" asks Busie, catching hold of my hand.

"No one—no one. We shall see every one, but no one will see us."

"In that case, I have something to ask you."

"A request?"

"A little request."

But I know her little request—to fly off to where her mother is, and play a little trick on her step-father.

"Why not?" I say to her. "With the greatest

Another Page

of pleasure. You may leave it to me, little fool. I can do something which they will not forget in a hurry."

"Not them, him alone," pleads Busie. But I do not give in so readily. When I get into a temper it is dangerous. Why should I forgive her for what she has done to Busie, the cheeky woman? The idea of marrying another man and going off with him, the devil knows where, leaving her child behind, and never even writing a letter! Did any one ever hear of such a wrong?

I excited myself for nothing. I was as sorry as if dogs were gnawing at me, but it was too late. Busie had covered her face with her two hands. Was she crying? I could have torn myself to pieces. What good had it done me to open her wound by speaking of her mother? In my own heart I called myself every bad name I could think of: "Horse, Beast, Ox, Cat, Good-for-nothing, Long-tongue." I drew closer to Busie, and took hold of her hand. I was about to say to her, the words of the "Song of Songs":

"Let me see thy countenance, let me hear thy voice."

Suddenly—How do my father and mother come here?

My father's silver spectacles shine from the distance. The silver strands of his hair and beard are spread out on the breeze. My mother is waving her shawl at us. We two, Busie and I, remain

Jewish Children

sitting. We are like paralysed. What are my parents doing here?

They had come to see what we were doing. They were afraid some accident had befallen us—God forbid! Who could tell? A little bridge, a water, a stream, a stream, a stream! Curious father and mother.

“And where are your green boughs?”

“What green boughs?”

“The green boughs that you went to gather for the ‘Shevuous’ decorations.”

Busie and I exchanged glances. I understood her looks. I imagined I heard her saying to me, in the words of the “Song of Songs”:

“O that thou wert as my brother! . . . Why are you not my brother?”

“Well, I expect we shall get some greenery for ‘Shevuous’ somehow,” says my father with a smile. And the silver strands of his silver-white beard glisten like rays of light in the golden red of the sun. “Thank God the children are well, and that no ill has befallen them.”

“Praised be the Lord!” replies my mother to him, wiping her moist red face with the ends of her shawl. And they are both glad. They seem to grow broader than long with delight.

Curious, curious father and mother!

A Pity for the Living

"If you were a good boy, you would help us to scrape the horse-radish until we are ready with the fish for the holy festival."

That was what my mother said to me on the eve of "*Shevuous*," about mid-day. She was helping the cook to prepare the fish for the supper. The fishes were still alive and wriggling. When they were put into a clay basin and covered with water they were still struggling.

More than any of the others there struggled a little carp with a broad back, and a round head and red eyes. It seemed that the little carp had a strong desire to get back into the river. It struggled hard. It leaped out of the basin, flapped its tail, and splashed the water right into my face. "Little boy, save me! Little boy, save me!"

I wiped my face, and betook myself to the task of scraping the horse-radish for the supper. I thought within myself, "Poor little fish. I can do nothing for you. They will soon take you in hand. You will be scaled and ripped open, cut into pieces, put in a pot, salted and peppered, placed on the fire, and boiled and simmered, and simmered, and simmered."

Jewish Children

"It's a pity," I said to my mother. "It's a pity for the living."

"Of whom is it a pity?"

"It's a pity of the little fishes."

"Who told you that?"

"The teacher."

"The teacher?"

She exchanged glances with the cook who was helping her, and they both laughed aloud.

"You are a fool, and your teacher a still greater fool. Ha! ha! Scrape the horse-radish, scrape away."

That I was a fool I knew. My mother told me that frequently, and my brothers and my sisters too. But that my teacher was a greater fool than I—that was news to me.

I have a comrade, Pinalle, the "*Shochet's*" son. I was at his house one day, and I saw how a little girl carried a fowl, a huge cock, its legs tied with a string. My comrade's father, the "*Shochet*," was asleep, and the little girl sat at the door and waited. The cock, a fine strong bird, tried to get out of the girl's arms. He drove his strong feet into her, pecked at her hand, let out from his throat a loud "Cock-a-doodle-doo!" protested as much as he could. But the girl was no weakling either. She thrust the head of the rooster under her arm and dug her elbows into him, saying:

"Be still, you wretch!"

And he obeyed and remained silent.

When the "*Shochet*" woke up, he washed his

A Pity for the Living

hands and took out his knife. He motioned to have the bird handed to him. I imagined that the cock changed colour. He must have thought that he was going to be freed to race back to his hens, to the corn and the water. But it was not so. The "*Shochet*" turned him round, caught him between his knees, thrust back his head with one hand, with the other plucked out a few little feathers, pronounced a blessing—heck! the knife was drawn across his throat. He was cast away. I thought he would fall to pieces.

"Pinalle, your father is a heathen," I said to my comrade.

"Why is he a heathen?"

"He has in him no pity for the living."

"I did not know you were so clever," said my comrade, and he pulled a long nose right into my face.

Our cook is blind of one eye. She is called "Fruma with the little eye." She is a girl without a heart. She once beat the cat with nettles for having run away with a little liver from the board. Afterwards, when she counted the fowls and the livers, it turned out that she had made a mistake. She had thought there were seven fowls, and, of course, seven little livers, and there were only six. And if there were only six fowls there could be only six little livers. Marvellous! She had accused the cat wrongly.

You might imagine that Fruma was sorry and apologized to the cat. But it appeared she forgot all about it. And the cat, too, forgot all about it.

Jewish Children

A few hours later she was lying on the stove, licking herself as if nothing had happened. It's not for nothing that people say: "A cat's brains!"

But I did not forget. No, I did not forget. I said to the cook: "You beat the cat for nothing. You had a sin for no reason. It was a pity for the living. The Lord will punish you."

"Will you go away, or else I'll give it you across the face with the towel."

That is what "Fruma with the little eye" said to me. And she added:

"Lord Almighty! Wherever in the world do such children come from?"

It was all about a dog that had been scalded with boiling water by the same "Fruma with the little eye." Ah, how much pain it caused the dog. It squealed, howled and barked with all its might, filling the world with noise. The whole town came together at the sound of his howling, and laughed, and laughed. All the dogs in the town barked out of sympathy, each from his own kennel, and each after his own fashion. One might think that they had been asked to bark. Afterwards, when the scalded dog had finished howling, he moaned and muttered and licked his sores, and growled softly. My heart melted within me. I went over to him and was going to fondle him.

"Here, Sirko!"

The dog, seeing my raised hand, jumped up as if he had been scalded again, took his tail between his legs and ran away—away.

A Pity for the Living

“Shah! Sirko!” I said trying to soothe him with soft words. “Why do you run away like that, fool? Am I doing you any harm?”

A dog is a dog. His tongue is dumb. He knows nothing of pity for the living.

My father saw me running after the dog and he pounced down on me.

“Go into ‘Cheder,’ dog-beater.”

Then I was the dog-beater.

It was all about two little birds—two tiny little birds that two boys, one big and one small, had killed. When the two little birds dropped from the tree they were still alive. Their feathers were ruffled. They fluttered their wings, and trembled in every limb.

“Get up, you hedgehog,” said the big boy to the small boy. And they took the little birds in their hands and beat their heads against the tree-trunk, until they died.

I could not contain myself, but ran over to the two boys.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“What’s that to do with you?” they demanded in Russian. “What harm is it?” they asked calmly. “They are no more than birds, ordinary little birds.”

“And if they are only birds? Have you no pity for the living—no mercy for the little birds?”

The boys looked curiously at one another, and as if they had already made up their minds in advance to do it, they at once fell upon me.

Jewish Children

When I came home, my torn jacket told the story, and my father gave me the good beating I deserved.

“Ragged fool!” cried my mother.

I forgave her for the “ragged fool,” but why did she also beat me?

Why was I beaten? Does not our teacher himself tell us that all creatures are dear to the Lord? Even a fly on the wall must not be hurt, he says, out of pity for the living. Even a spider, that is an evil spirit, must not be killed either, he tells us emphatically.

“If the spider deserved to die, then the Lord Himself would slay him.”

Then comes the question: Very well, if that is so, then why do the people slaughter cows and calves and sheep and fowls every day of the week?

And not only cows and other animals and fowls, but do not men slaughter one another? At the time when we had the “*Pogrom*,” did not men throw down little children from the tops of houses? Did they not kill our neighbours’ little girl? Her name was Peralle. And how did they kill her?

Ah, how I loved that little girl. And how that little girl loved me! “Uncle Bebebe,” she used to call me. (My name is Velvalle.) And she used to pull me by the nose with her small, thin, sweet little fingers. Because of her, because of Peralle, every one calls me “Uncle Bebebe.”

“Here comes Uncle Bebebe, and he will take you in hand.”

A Pity for the Living

Peralle was a sickly child. That is to say, in the ordinary way she was all right, but she could not walk, neither walk nor stand, only sit. They used to carry her into the open and put her sitting in the sand, right in the sun. She loved the sun, loved it terribly. I used to carry her about. She used to clasp me around the neck with her small, thin, sweet little fingers, and nestle her whole body close to me—closer and closer. She would put her head on my shoulder. “I love Uncle Bebebe.”

Our neighbour Krenni says she cannot forget Uncle Bebebe to this day. When she sees me, she says she is again reminded of her Peralle.

My mother is angry with her for weeping.

“We must not weep,” says my mother. “We must not sin. We must forget—forget.”

That is what my mother says. She interrupts Krenni in the middle and drives me off.

“If you don’t get into our eyes, we won’t remember that which we must not.”

Ha! ha! How is it possible to forget? When I think of that little girl the tears come into my eyes of their own accord—of their own accord.

“See, he weeps again, the wise one,” cries “Fruma with the little eye” to my mother. My mother gives me a quick glance and laughs aloud.

“The horse-radish has gone into your eyes. The devil take you. It’s a hard piece of horse-radish. I forgot to tell him to close his eyes. Woe is me! Here is my apron. Wipe your eyes, foolish boy. And your nose, too, wipe at the same time your nose, your nose.”

The Tabernacle

There are people who have never been taught anything, and know everything, have never been anywhere, and understand everything, have never given a moment's thought to anything, and comprehend everything.

“Blessed hands” is the name bestowed on these fortunate beings. The world envies, honours and respects them.

There was such a man in our town, Kassrillevka. They called him Moshe-for-once, because, whatever he heard or saw or made, he exclaimed:

“It is such-and-such a thing for once.”

A new cantor in the synagogue—he is a cantor for once.

Some one is carrying a turkey for the Passover—it is a turkey for once.

“There will be a fine frost tomorrow.”

“A fine frost for once.”

“There were blows exchanged at the meeting.”

“Good blows for once.”

“Oh, Jews, I am a poor man.”

“A poor man for once.”

And so of everything.

Moshe was a—— I cannot tell you what Moshe was. He was a Jew, but what he lived by it would

The Tabernacle

be hard to say. He lived as many thousands of Jews live in Kassrillevka—tens of thousands. He hovered around the overlord. That is, not the overlord himself, but the gentlefolks that were with the overlord. And not around the gentlefolks themselves, but around the Jews that hovered around the gentlefolks who were with the overlord. And if he made a living—that was another story. Moshe-for-once was a man who hated to boast of his good fortune, or to bemoan his ill-fortune. He was always jolly. His cheeks were always red. One end of his moustache was longer than the other. His hat was always on one side of his head; and his eyes were always smiling and kindly. He never had any time, but was always ready to walk ten miles to do any one a favour.

That's the sort of a man Moshe-for-once was.

There wasn't a thing in the world Moshe-for once could not make—a house, or a clock, or a machine, a lamp, a spinning-top, a tap, a mirror, a cage, and what not.

True, no one could point to the houses, the clocks, or the machines that came from his hands; but every one was satisfied Moshe could make them. Every one said that if need be, Moshe could turn the world upside down. The misfortune was that he had no tools. I mean the contrary. That was his good fortune. Through this, the world was not turned upside down. That is, the world remained a world.

That Moshe was not torn to pieces was a miracle. When a lock went wrong they came to Moshe.

Jewish Children

When the clock stopped, or the tap of the "*Samovar*" went out of order, or there appeared in a house blackbeetles, or bugs, or other filthy creatures, it was always Moshe who was consulted. Or when a fox came and choked the fowls, whose advice was asked? It was always and ever Moshe-for-once.

True, the broken lock was thrown away, the clock had to be sent to a watchmaker, and the "*Samovar*" to the copper-smith. The blackbeetles, and bugs and other filthy things were not at all frightened of Moshe. And the fox went on doing what a fox ought to do. But Moshe-for-once still remained the same Moshe-for-once he had been. After all, he had blessed hands; and no doubt he had something in him. A world cannot be mad. In proof of this—why do the people not come to you or me with their broken locks, or broken clocks, or for advice how to get rid of foxes, or blackbeetles and bugs and other filthy things? All the people in the world are not the same. And it appears that talent is rare.

• • • • •

We became very near neighbours with this Moshe-for-once. We lived in the same house with him, under the one roof. I say became, because, before that, we lived in our own house. The wheels of fortune suddenly turned round for us. Times grew bad. We did not wish to be a burden to any one. We sold our house, paid our debts, and moved into Hershke Mamtzes' house. It was an old ruin, without a garden, without a yard, without a paling, without a body, and without life.

The Tabernacle

“Well, it’s a hut,” said my mother, pretending to be merry. But I saw tears in her eyes.

“Do not sin,” said my father, who was black as the earth. “Thank God for this.”

Why for “this,” I do not know. Perhaps because we were not living on the street? I would rather have lived on the street than in this house, with strange boys and girls whom I did not know, nor wish to know, with their yellow hair, and their running noses, with their thin legs and fat bellies. When they walked they waddled like ducks. They did nothing but eat, and when any one else was eating, they stared right into his mouth.

I was very angry with the Lord for having taken our house from us. I was not sorry for the house as for the Tabernacle we had there. It stood from year to year. It had a roof that could be raised and lowered, and a beautiful carved ceiling of green and yellow boards, made into squares with a “Shield of David” in the middle. True, kind friends told us to hope on, for we should one day buy the house back, or the Lord would help us to build another, and a better, and a bigger and a handsomer house than the one we had had to sell. But all this was cold comfort to us. I heard the same sort of words when I broke my tin watch, accidentally, of course, into fragments. My mother smacked me, and my father wiped my eyes, and promised to buy me a better, and bigger and handsomer watch than the one I broke. But the more my father praised the watch he was going to buy for me, the more I cried for the other, the old

Jewish Children

watch. When my father was not looking, my mother wept silently for the old house. And my father sighed and groaned. A black cloud settled on his face, and his big white forehead was covered with wrinkles.

I thought it was very wrong of the Father of the Universe to have taken our house from us.

“I ask you—may your health increase!—what are we going to do with the Tabernacle?” asked my mother of my father some time before the Feast of Tabernacles.

“You probably mean to ask what are we going to do without a Tabernacle?” replied my father, attempting to jest. I saw that he was distressed. He turned away to one side, so that we might not see his face, which was covered with a thick black cloud. My mother blew her nose to swallow her tears. And I, looking at them. . . . Suddenly my father turned to us with a lively expression on his face.

“Hush! We have here a neighbour called Moshe.”

“Moshe-for-once?” asked my mother. And I do not know whether she was making fun or was in earnest. It seemed she was in earnest, for, half an hour later, the three were going about the house, father, Moshe, and Hershke Mamtzes, our landlord, looking for a spot on which to erect a Tabernacle.

Hershke Mamtzes’ house was all right. It had

The Tabernacle

only one fault. It stood on the street, and had not a scrap of yard. It looked as if it had been lost in the middle of the road. Somebody was walking along and lost a house, without a yard, without a roof, the door on the other side of the street, like a coat with the waist in front and the buttons underneath. If you talk to Hershke, he will bore you to death about his house. He will tell you how he came by it, how they wanted to take it from him, and how he fought for it, until it remained with him.

"Where do you intend to erect the Tabernacle, 'Reb' Moshe?" asked father of Moshe-for-once. And Moshe-for-once, his hat on the back of his head, was lost in thought, as if he were a great architect formulating a big plan. He pointed with his hand from here to there, and from there to here. He tried to make us understand that if the house were not standing in the middle of the street, and if it had had a yard, we would have had two walls ready made, and he could have built us a Tabernacle in a day. Why do I say in a day? In an hour. But since the house had no yard, and we needed four walls, the Tabernacle would take a little longer to build. But for that again, we would have a Tabernacle for once. The main thing was to get the material.

"There will be materials. Have you the tools?" asked Hershke.

"The tools will be found. Have you the timber?" asked Moshe.

Jewish Children

"There is timber. Have you the nails?" asked Hershke.

"Nails can be got. Have you the fir-boughs?" asked Moshe.

"Somehow, you are a little too so-so today," said Hershke.

"A little too what?" asked Moshe. They looked each other straight in the eyes, and both burst out laughing.

When Hershke Mamtzes brought the first few boards and beams, Moshe said that, please God, it would be a Tabernacle for once. I wondered how he was going to make a Tabernacle out of the few boards and beams. I begged of my mother to let me stand by whilst Moshe was working. And Moshe not only let me stand by him, but even let me be his assistant. I was to hand him what he wanted, and hold things for him.

Of course this put me into the seventh heaven of delight. Was it a trifle to help build the Tabernacle? I was of great assistance to Moshe. I moved my lips when he hammered; went for meals when he went; shouted at the other children not to hinder us; handed Moshe the hammer when he wanted the chisel, and the pincers when he wanted a nail. Any other man would have thrown the hammer or pincers at my head for such help, but Moshe-for-once had no temper. No one had ever had the privilege of seeing him angry.

"Anger is a sinful thing. It does as little good as any sin."

The Tabernacle

And because I was greatly absorbed in the work, I did not notice how and by what miracle the Tabernacle came into being.

“Come and see the Tabernacle we have built,” I said to father, and dragged him out of the house by the tails of his coat. My father was delighted with our work. He looked at Moshe with a smile, and said, pointing to me:

“Had you at any rate a little help from him?”

“It was a help, for once,” replied Moshe, looking up at the roof of the Tabernacle with anxious eyes.

“If only our Hershke brings us the fir-boughs, it will be a Tabernacle for once.”

Hershke Mamtzes worried us about the fir-boughs. He put off going for them from day to day. The day before the Festival he went off and brought back a cart-load of thin sticks, a sort of weeds, such as grow on the banks of the river. And we began to cover the Tabernacle. That is to say, Moshe did the work, and I helped him by driving off the goats which had gathered around the fir-boughs, as if they were something worth while. I do not know what taste they found in the bitter green stalks.

Because the house stood alone, in the middle of the street, there was no getting rid of the goats. If you drove one off another came up. The second was only just got rid of, when the first sprang up again. I drove them off with sticks.

“Get out of this. Are you here again, foolish goats? Get off.”

Jewish Children

The devil knows how they found out we had green fir-boughs. It seems they told one another, because there gathered around us all the goats of the town. And I, all alone, had to do battle with them.

The Lord helped us, and we had all the fir-boughs on the roof. The goats remained standing around us like fools. They looked up with foolish eyes, and stupidly chewed the cud. I had my revenge of them, and I said to them:

“Why don’t you take the fir-boughs now, foolish goats?”

They must have understood me, for they began to go off, one by one, in search of something to eat. And we began to decorate the Tabernacle from the inside. First of all, we strewed the floor with sand; then we hung on the walls all the wadded quilts belonging to the neighbours. Where there was no wadded quilt, there hung a shawl, and where there was no shawl, there was a sheet or a table-cloth. Then we brought out all the chairs and tables, the candle-sticks and candles, the plates and knives and forks and spoons. And each of the three women of the house made the blessing over her own candles for the Feast of Tabernacles.

My mother—peace be unto her!—was a woman who loved to weep. The Days of Mourning were her Days of Rejoicing. And since we had lost our own house, her eyes were not dry for a single

The Tabernacle

minute. My father, though he was also fretted, did not like this. He told her to fear the Lord, and not sin. There were worse circumstances than ours, thank God. But now, in the Tabernacle, when she was blessing the Festival candles, she could cover her face with her hands and weep in silence without any one knowing it. But I was not to be fooled. I could see her shoulders heaving, and the tears trickling through her thin white fingers. And I even knew what she was weeping for. . . . It was well for her that father was getting ready to go to synagogue, putting on his Sabbath coat that was tattered, but was still made of silk, and his plaited silk girdle. He thrust his hands into his girdle, and said to me, sighing deeply:

“Come, let us go. It is time we went to synagogue to pray.”

I took the prayer-books, and we went off. Mother remained at home to pray. I knew what she would do—weep. She might weep as much as she liked, for she would be alone. And it was so. When we came back, and entered the Tabernacle, and father started to make the blessing over the wine, I looked into her eyes, and they were red, and had swollen lids. Her nose was shining. Nevertheless, she was to me beautiful as Rachel or Abigail, or the Queen of Sheba, or Queen Esther. Looking at her, I was reminded of all our beautiful Jewish women with whom I had just become acquainted at “Cheder.” And looking at my mother, with her lovely face that looked lovelier above the lovely silk

Jewish Children

shawl she wore, with her large, beautiful, careworn eyes, my heart was filled with pain that such lovely eyes should be tear-stained always—that such lovely white hands should have to bake and cook. And I was angry with the Lord because He did not give us a lot of money. And I prayed to the Lord to destine me to find a treasure of gold and diamonds and brilliants. Or let the Messiah come, and we would go back to the Land of Israel, where we should all be happy.

This was what I thought. And my imagination carried me far, far away, to my golden dreams that I would not exchange for all the money in the world. And the beautiful Festival prayers, sung by my father in his softest and most melodious voice, rang in my ears.

“Thou hast chosen us above all peoples,
“Us hast Thou chosen
“Of all the nations.”

Is it a trifle to be God’s chosen people? To be God’s only child? My heart was glad for the happy chosen people. And I imagined I was a prince. Yes, a prince. And the Tabernacle was a palace. The Divine Holiness rested on it. My mother was the beautiful daughter of Jerusalem, the Queen of Sheba. And on the morrow we would make the blessing over the most beautiful fruit in the world—the citron. Ah, who could compare with me? Who could compare with me?

After father, Moshe-for-once pronounced the blessing over the wine. It was not the same blessing

The Tabernacle

as my father's—but, really not. After him, the landlord, Hershke Mamtzes pronounced the blessing over the wine. He was a commonplace man, and it was a commonplace blessing. We went to wash our hands, and we pronounced the blessing over the bread. And each of the three women brought out the food for her family—fine, fresh, seasoned, pleasant, fragrant fish. And each family sat around its own table. There were many dishes; a lot of people had soup; a lot of mouths were eating. A little wind blew into the Tabernacle, through the frail thin walls, and the thin roof of fir-boughs. The candles spluttered. Every one was eating heartily the delicious Festival supper. And I imagined it was not a Tabernacle but a palace—a great, big, brilliantly lit-up palace. And we Jews, the chosen people, the princes, were sitting in the palace and enjoying the pleasures of life. "It is well for you, little Jews," thought I. "No one is so well-off as you. No one else is privileged to sit in such a beautiful palace, covered with green fir-boughs, strewn with yellow sand, decorated with the most beautiful tapestries in the world, on the tables the finest suppers, and real Festival fish which is the daintiest of all dainties. And who speaks of—" Suddenly, crash! The whole roof and the fir-boughs are on our heads. One wall after the other is falling in. A goat fell from on high, right on top of us. It suddenly grew pitch dark. All the candles were extinguished. All the tables were over-turned. And we all, with the suppers and the crockery and the goat, were stretched out on the

Jewish Children

sand. The moon shone, and the stars peeped out, and the goat jumped up, frightened, and stood on its thin legs, stock-still, while it stared at us with foolish eyes. It soon marched off, like an insolent creature, over the tables and chairs, and over our heads, bleating "Meh-eh-eh-eh!" The candles were extinguished; the crockery smashed; the supper in the sand; and we were all frightened to death. The women were shrieking, the children crying. It was a destruction of everything—a real destruction.

“You built a fine Tabernacle,” said Hershke Mamtzes to us in such a voice, as if we had had from him for building the Tabernacle goodness knows how much money. “It was a fine Tabernacle, when one goat could overthrow it.”

“It was a Tabernacle for once,” replied Moshe-for-once. He stood like one beaten, looking upwards, to see whence the destruction had come. “It was a Tabernacle for once.”

“Yes, a Tabernacle for once,” repeated Hershke Mamtzes, in a voice full of deadly venom. And every one echoed his words, all in one voice:

“A Tabernacle for once.”

The Dead Citron

My name is Leib. When I am called up to read the portion of the Law it is by the name of Yehudah-Leib. At home, I sign myself Lyef Moishevitch. Amongst the Germans I am known as Herr Leon. Here in England, I am Mr. Leon. When I was a child I was called Leibel. At "*Cheder*" I was Lieb-Dreib-Obderick. You must know that at our "*Cheder*" every boy has a nickname. For instance—"Mottel-Kappotel," "Meyer-Dreyer," "Mendel-Fendel," "Chayim-Clayim," "Itzig-Shpitzig," "Berel-Tzap." Did you ever hear such rhymes? That Itzig rhymes with Shpitzig, and Mendel with Fendel, and Chayim with Clayim is correct. But what has Berel to do with Tzap, or how does Leib rhyme with Obderick? I did not like my nickname. And I fought about it. I got blows and thumps and smacks and whacks and pinches and kicks from all sides. I was black and blue. Because I was the smallest in the "*Cheder*"—the smallest and the weakest and the poorest, no one defended me. On the contrary, the two rich boys tortured me. One got on top of me, and the other pulled me by the ear. Whilst the third—a poor boy—sang a song to tease me—

Jewish Children

"Just so! Just so!
Give it to him.
Punch him.
Bang him.
His little limbs,
His little limbs.
Just so! Just so!"

At such times I lay quiet as a kitten. And when they let me go I went into a corner and wept silently. I wiped my eyes, went back to my comrades, and was all right again.

Just a word—whenever you meet the name Leibel in this story, you will know it refers to me.

I am soft as down, short and fat. In reality, I am not so fat as I look. On the contrary, I am rather bony, but I wear thick, wadded little trousers, a thick, wadded vest, and a thick wadded coat. You see my mother wants me to be warm. She is afraid I might catch cold, God forbid! And she wraps me in cotton-wool from head to foot. She believes that cotton-wool is very good to wrap a boy in, but must not be used for making balls. I provided all the boys with cotton-wool. I pulled it out of my trousers and coat until she caught me. She beat me, and whacked me, and thumped me and pinched me. But Leibel went on doing what he liked—distributing cotton-wool.

My face is red, my cheeks rather blue, and my nose always running. "Such a nose!" cries my mother. "If he had no nose, he would be all right. He would have nothing to freeze in the cold weather." I often try to picture to myself what

The Dead Citron

would happen if I had no nose at all. If people had no noses, what would they look like? Then the question is—? But I was going to tell you the story of a dead citron, and I have wandered off to goodness knows where. I will break off in the middle of what I was saying, and go back to the story of the dead citron.

My father, Moshe-Yankel, has been a clerk at an insurance company's office for many years. He gets five and a half "roubles" a week. He is waiting for a rise in wages. He says that if he gets his rise this year, please God, he will buy a citron. But my mother, Basse-Beila, has no faith in this. She says the barracks will fall down before father will get a rise.

One day, shortly before the New Year, Leibel overheard the following conversation between his father and his mother.

He: "Though the world turn upside down, I must have a citron this year!"

She: "The world will not turn upside down, and you will have no citron."

He: "That's what you say. But supposing I have already been promised something towards a citron?"

She: "It will have to be written into the books of Jests. In the month called after the town of Kreminitz a miracle happened—a bear died in the forest. But what then? If I do not believe it, I shall not be a great heretic either."

He: "You may believe or not. I tell you that

Jewish Children

this Feast of Tabernacles, we shall have a citron of our own."

She: "Amen! May it be so! From your mouth into God's ears!"

"Amen, amen," repeated Leibel in his heart. And he pictured to himself his father coming into the synagogue, like a respectable householder, with his own citron and his own palm-branch. And though Moshe-Yankel is only a clerk, still when the men walk around the Ark with their palms and their citrons, he will follow them with his palm and citron. And Leibel's heart was full of joy. When he came to "*Cheder*," he at once told every one that this year his father would have his own palm and citron. But no one believed him.

"What do you say to his father?" asked the young scamps of one another. "Such a man—such a beggar amongst beggars desires to have a citron of his own. He must imagine it is a lemon, or a '*groschen*' apple."

That was what the young scamps said. And they gave Leibel a few good smacks and thumps, and punches and digs and pushes. And Leibel began to believe that his father was a beggar amongst beggars. And a beggar must have no desires. But how great was his surprise when he came home and found "*Reb*" Henzel sitting at the table, in his Napoleonic cap, facing his father. In front of them stood a box full of citrons, the beautiful perfume of which reached the furthest corners of the house.

The Dead Citron

The cap which "*Reb*" Henzel wore was the sort of cap worn in the time of Napoleon the First. Over there in France, these caps were long out of fashion. But in our village there was still one to be found—only one, and it belonged to "*Reb*" Henzel. The cap was long and narrow. It had a slit and a button in front, and at the back two tassels. I always wanted these tassels. If the cap had fallen into my hands for two minutes—only two, the tassels would have been mine.

"*Reb*" Henzel had spread out his whole stock-in-trade. He took up a citron with his two fingers, and gave it to father to examine.

"Take this citron, '*Reb*' Moshe-Yankel. You will enjoy it."

"A good one?" asked my father, examining the citron on all sides, as one might examine a diamond. His hands trembled with joy.

"And what a good one," replied "*Reb*" Henzel, and the tassels of his cap shook with his laughter.

Moshe-Yankel played with the citron, smelled it, and could not take his eyes off it. He called over his wife to him, and showed her, with a happy smile, the citron, as if he were showing her a precious jewel, a priceless gem, a rare antique, or an only child—a dear one.

Basse-Beila drew near, and put out her hand slowly to take hold of the citron. But she did not get it.

"Be careful with your hands. A sniff if you like."

Basse-Beila was satisfied with a sniff of the citron. I was not even allowed to sniff it. I was not

Jewish Children

allowed to go too near it, or even to look at it.

"He is here, too," said my mother. "Only let him go near it, and he will at once bite the top off the citron."

"The Lord forbid!" cried my father.

"The Lord preserve us!" echoed "*Reb*" Henzel. And the tassels shook again. He gave father some cotton-wool into which he might nest the citron. The beautiful perfume spread into every corner of the house. The citron was wrapped up as carefully as if it had been a diamond, or a precious gem. And it was placed in a beautiful round, carved, painted and decorated wooden sugar box. The sugar was taken out, and the citron was put in instead, like a beloved guest.

"Welcome art thou, '*Reb*' citron! Into the box—into the box!"

The box was carefully closed, and placed in the glass cupboard. The door was closed over on it, and good-bye!

"I am afraid the heathen"—that was meant for me—"will open the door, take out the citron, and bite its top off," said my mother. She took me by the hand, and drew me away from the cupboard.

Like a cat that has smelt butter, and jumps down from a height for it, straightens her back, goes round and round, rubbing herself against everything, looks into everybody's eyes, and licks herself—in like manner did Leibel, poor thing, go round and round the cupboard. He gazed in through the glass door, smiled at the box containing the citron, until his mother saw him, and said to his father that

The Dead Citron

the young scamp wanted to get hold of the citron to bite off its top.

"To '*Cheder*,' you blackguard! May you never be thought of, you scamp!"

Leibel bent his head, lowered his eyes, and went off to "*Cheder*."

• • • • •
The few words his mother had said to his father about his biting off the top of the citron burned themselves into Leibel's heart, and ate into his bones like a deadly poison.

The top of the citron buried itself in Leibel's brain. It did not leave his thoughts for a moment. It entered his dreams at night, worried him, and almost dragged him by the hand. "You do not recognize me, foolish boy? It is I—the top of the citron." Leibel turned round on the other side, groaned, and went to sleep. It worried him again. "Get up, fool. Go and open the cupboard, take out the citron, and bite me off. You will enjoy yourself."

Leibel got up in the morning, washed his hands, and began to say his prayers. He took his breakfast, and was going off to "*Cheder*." Passing by, he glanced in the direction of the glass cupboard. Through the glass door, he saw the box containing the citron. And he imagined the box was winking at him. "Over here, over here, little boy." Leibel marched straight out of the house.

One morning, when Leibel got up, he found himself alone in the house. His father had gone off to business, his mother had gone to the market.

Jewish Children

The servant was busy in the kitchen. "Every one is gone. There isn't a soul in the house," thought Leibel. Passing by, he again looked inside the glass cupboard. He saw the sugar box that held the citron. It seemed to be beckoning to him. "Over here, over here, little boy." Leibel opened the glass door softly and carefully, and took out the box—the beautiful, round, carved, decorated wooden box, and raised the lid. Before he had time to lift out the citron, the fragrance of it filled his nostrils—the pungent, heavenly odour. Before he had time to turn around, the citron was in his hand, and the top of it in his eyes.

"Do you want to enjoy yourself? Do you want to know the taste of Paradise? Take and bite me off. Do not be afraid, little fool. No one will know of it. Not a son of Adam will see you. No bird will tell on you."

• • • • •

You want to know what happened? You want to know whether I bit the top off the citron, or held myself back from doing it? I should like to know what you would have done in my place—if you had been told ten times not to dare to bite the top off the citron? Would you not have wanted to know what it tasted like? Would you not also have thought of the plan—to bite it off, and stick it on again with spittle? You may believe me or not—that is your affair—but I do not know myself how it happened. Before the citron was rightly in my hands, the top of it was between my teeth.

The Dead Citron

The day before the Festival, father came home a little earlier from his work, to untie the palm-branch. He had put it away very carefully in a corner, warning Leibel not to attempt to go near it. But it was useless warning him. Leibel had his own troubles. The top of the citron haunted him. Why had he wanted to bite it off? What good had it done him to taste it when it was bitter as gall? It was for nothing he had spoiled the citron, and rendered it unfit for use. That the citron could not now be used, Leibel knew very well. Then what had he done this for? Why had he spoiled this beautiful creation, bitten off its head, and taken its life? Why? Why? He dreamt of the citron that night. It haunted him, and asked him: "Why have you done this thing to me? Why did you bite off my head? I am now useless—useless." Liebel turned over on the other side, groaned, and fell asleep again. But he was again questioned by the citron. "Murderer, what have you against me? What had my head done to you?"

The first day of the Feast of Tabernacles arrived. After a frosty night, the sun rose and covered the earth with a delayed warmth, like that of a step-mother. That morning Moshe-Yankel got up earlier than usual to learn off by heart the Festival prayers, reciting them in the beautiful Festival melody. That day also Basse-Beila was very busy cooking the fish and the other Festival dishes. That day also Zalmen the carpenter came to our Tabernacle to make a blessing over the citron and palm

Jewish Children

before any one else, so that he might be able to drink tea with milk and enjoy the Festival.

"Zalmen wants the palm and the citron," said my mother to my father.

"Open the cupboard, and take out the box, but carefully," said my father.

He himself stood on a chair and took down from the top shelf the palm, and brought it to the Tabernacle to the carpenter.

"Here, make the blessing," he said. "But be careful, in Heaven's name be careful!"

Our neighbour Zalmen was a giant of a man—may no evil eye harm him! He had two hands each finger of which might knock down three such Leibels as I. His hands were always sticky, and his nails red from glue. And when he drew one of these nails across a piece of wood, there was a mark that might have been made with a sharp piece of iron.

In honour of the Festival, Zalmen had put on a clean shirt and a new coat. He had scrubbed his hands in the bath, with soap and sand, but had not succeeded in making them clean. They were still sticky and the nails still red with glue.

Into these hands fell the dainty citron. It was not for nothing Moshe-Yankel was excited when Zalmen gave the citron a good squeeze and the palm a good shake.

"Be careful, be careful," he cried. "Now turn the citron head downwards, and make the blessing. Carefully, carefully. For Heaven's sake, be careful!"

The Dead Citron

Suddenly Moshe-Yankel threw himself forward, and cried out, "Oh!" The cry brought his wife, Basse-Beila, running into the Tabernacle.

"What is it, Moshe-Yankel? God be with you!"

"Coarse blackguard! Man of the earth!" he shouted at the carpenter, and was ready to kill him. "How could you be such a coarse blackguard? Such a man of the earth? Is a citron an ax? Or is it a saw? Or a bore? A citron is neither an ax nor a saw nor a bore. You have cut my throat without a knife. You have spoiled my citron. Here is the top of it—here, see! Coarse blackguard! Man of the earth!"

We were all paralysed on the instant. Zalmen was like a dead man. He could not understand how this misfortune had happened to him. How had the top come off the citron? Surely he had held it very lightly, only just with the tips of his fingers? It was a misfortune—a terrible misfortune.

Basse-Beila was pale as death. She wrung her hands and moaned.

"When a man is unfortunate, he may as well bury himself alive and fresh and well, right in the earth."

And Leibel? Leibel did not know whether he should dance with joy because the Lord had performed a miracle for him, released him from all the trouble he had got himself into, or whether he should cry for his father's agony and his mother's tears, or whether he should kiss Zalmen's thick hands with the sticky fingers and the red nails, be-

Jewish Children

cause he was his redeemer, his good angel. . . . Leibel looked at his father's face and his mother's tears, the carpenter's hands, and at the citron that lay on the table, yellow as wax, without a head, without a spark of life, a dead thing, a corpse.

"A dead citron," said my father, in a broken voice.

"A dead citron," repeated my mother, the tears gushing from her eyes.

"A dead citron," echoed the carpenter, looking at his hands. He seemed to be saying to himself: "There's a pair of hands for you! May they wither!"

"A dead citron," said Leibel, in a joyful voice. But he caught himself up, fearing his tones might proclaim that he, Leibel, was the murderer, the slaughterer of the citron.

Isshur the Beadle

When I think of Isshur the beadle, I am reminded of Alexander the Great, Napoleon Bonaparte, and other such giants of history.

Isshur was not a nobody. He led the whole congregation, the whole town by the nose. He had the whole town in his hand. He was a man who served everybody and commanded everybody; a man who was under everybody, but feared nobody. He had a cross look, terrifying eyebrows, a beard of brass, a powerful fist, and a long stick. Isshur was a name to conjure with.

Who made Isshur what he was? Ask me an easier question. There are types of whom it can be said they are cast, fixed. They never move out of their place. As you see them the first time, so are they always. It seems they always were as they are, and will ever remain the same. When I was a child, I could not tear myself away from Isshur. I was always puzzling out the one question—What was Isshur like before he was Isshur? That is to say, before he got those terrifying eyebrows, and the big hooked nose that was always filled with snuff, and the big brass beard that started by being thick and heavy, and ended up in a few, long straggling, terrifying hairs. How did he look when he

Jewish Children

was a child, ran about barefoot, went to "*Cheder*," and was beaten by his teacher? And what was Isshur like when his mother was carrying him about in her arms, when she suckled him, wiped his nose for him, and said: "Isshur, my sweet boy. My beautiful boy. May I suffer instead of your little bones?"

These were the questions that puzzled me when I was a child, and could not tear myself away from Isshur.

"Go home, wretches. May the devil take your father and mother." And Isshur would not even allow any one to think of him.

Surely, I was only one boy, yet Isshur called me wretches. You must know that Isshur hated to have any one staring at him. Isshur hated little children. He could not bear them. "Children," he said, "are naturally bad. They are scamps and contradictory creatures. Children are goats that leap into strange gardens. Children are dogs that snap at one's coat-tails. Children are pigs that crawl on the table. Children should be taught manners. They ought to be made to tremble, as with the ague." And we did tremble as if we had the ague.

Why were we afraid, you ask. Well, would you not be afraid if you were taken by the ear, dragged to the door, and beaten over the neck and shoulders?

"Go home, wretches. May the devil take your father and mother."

You will tell your mother on him? Well, try it. You want to know what will happen? I will tell you. You will go home and show your mother your

Isshur the Beadle

torn ear. Your mother will pounce on your father. "You see how the tyrant has torn the ear of your child—your only son." Your father will take you by the hand to the synagogue, and straight over to Isshur the beadle, as if to say to him: "Here, see what you have done to my only son. You have almost torn off his ear." And Isshur will reply to my father's unspoken words: "Go in health with your wretches." You hear? Even an only son is also wretches. And what can father do? Push his hat on one side, and go home. Mother will ask him: "Well?" And he will reply: "I gave it to him, the wicked one, the Haman! What more could I do to him?"

It is not at all nice that a father should tell such a big lie. But what is one to do when one is under the yoke of a beadle?

One might say that the whole town is under Isshur's yoke. He does what he likes. If he does not want to heat the synagogue in the middle of winter, you may burst arguing with him. He will heed you no more than last year's snow. If Isshur wants prayers to start early in the morning, you will be too late whenever you come. If Isshur does not want you to read the portion of the Law for eighteen weeks on end, you may stare at him from today till tomorrow, or cough until you burst. He will neither see nor hear you. It is the same with your praying-shawl, or your prayer-book, or with your citron, or the willow-twigs. Isshur will bring them to you when he likes, not when you like. He says

Jewish Children

that householders are plentiful as dogs, but there is only one beadle—may no evil eye harm him! The congregation is so big, one might go mad.

And Isshur was proud and haughty. He reduced every one to the level of the earth. The most respectable householder often got it hot from him. "It is better for you not to start with me," he said. "I have no time to talk to you. There are a lot of you, and I am only one—may no evil eye harm me!" And nobody began with him. They were glad that he did not begin with them.

Naturally, no one would dream of asking Isshur what became of the money donated to the synagogue, or of the money he got for the candles, and the money thrown into the collection boxes. Nor did they ask him any other questions relating to the management of the synagogue. He was the master of the whole concern. And whom was he to give an account to? The people were glad if he left them alone, and that he did not throw the keys into their faces. "Here, keep this place going yourselves. Provide it with wood and water, candles and matches. The towels must be kept clean. A slate has to be put on the roof frequently, and the walls and ceiling have to be whitewashed. The stands have to be repaired, and the books bought. And what about the '*Chanukali*' lamp? And what of the palm-branch and the citron? And where is this, and where is that?" And though every one knew that all the things he mentioned not only did not mean an outlay of money, but were, on the contrary, a source of income, yet no one dared interfere.

Isshur the Beadle

All these belonged to the beadle. They were his means of livelihood. "The fine salary I get from you! One's head might grow hard on it. It's only enough for the water for the porridge," said Isshur. And the people were silent.

The people were silent, though they knew very well that "*Reb*" Isshur was saving money. They knew very well he had plenty of money. It was possible he even lent out money on interest, in secret, on good securities, of course. He had a little house of his own, and a garden, and a cow. And he drank a good glassful of brandy every day. In the winter he wore the best fur coat. His wife always wore good boots without holes. She made herself a new cloak not long ago, out of the public money. "May she suffer through it for our blood, Father in heaven!"

That's what the villagers muttered softly through their teeth, so that the beadle might not hear them. When he approached, they broke off and spoke of something else. They blinked their eyes, breathed hard, and took from the beadle a pinch of snuff with their two fingers. "Excuse me."

This "excuse me" was a nasty "excuse me." It was meant to be flattering, to convey the sense of—"Excuse me, your snuff is surely good." And, "Excuse me, give me a pinch of snuff, and go in peace."

Isshur understood the compliment, and also the hint. He knew the people loved him like sore eyes. He knew the people wished to take away his office from him as surely as they wished to live.

Jewish Children

But he heeded them as little as Haman heeds the "Purim" rattles. He had them in his fists, and he knew what to do.

He who wants to find favour with everybody will find favour with nobody. And if one has to bow down, let it be to the head, not to the feet.

Isshur understood these two wise sayings. He sought the favour of the leaders of the community. He did everything they told him to, lay under their feet, and flew on any errand on which they sent him. And he flattered them until it made one sick. There is no need to say anything of what went on at the elections. Then Isshur never rested. Whoever has not seen Isshur at such a time has seen nothing. Covered with perspiration, his hat pushed back on his head, Isshur kneaded the thick mud with his high boots, and with his big stick. He flew from one committee-man to another, worked, plotted, planned, told lies, and carried on intrigues and intrigues without an end.

Isshur was always first-class at carrying on intrigues. He could have brought together a wall and a wall. He could make mischief in such a way that every person in the town should be enraged with everybody else, quarrel and abuse his neighbour, and almost come to blows. And he was innocent of everything. You must know that Isshur had the town very cleverly. He thought within himself: "Argue, quarrel, abuse one another, my

Isshur the Beadle

friends, and you will forget all about the doings of Isshur the beadle."

That they should forget his doings was an important matter to Isshur, because, of late, the people had begun to talk to him, and to demand from him an account of the money he had taken for the synagogue. And who had done this? The young people—the young wretches he had always hated and tortured.

They say that children become men, and men become children. Many generations have grown up, become men, and gone hence. The youngsters became greybeards. The little wretches became self-supporting young men. The young men got married and became householders. The householders became old men, and still Isshur was Isshur. But all at once there grew up a generation that was young, fresh, curious—a generation which was called heathens, insolent, fearless, devils, wretches. The Lord help and preserve one from them.

"How does Isshur come to be an overlord? He is only a beadle. He ought to serve us, and not we him. How long more will this old Isshur with the long legs and big stick rule over us? The account. Where is the account? We must have the account."

This was the demand of the new generation that was made up entirely of heathens, insolent ones, fearless ones, devils and wretches. They shouted in the yard of the synagogue at the top of their voices. Isshur pretended to be deaf, and not to

Jewish Children

hear anything. Afterwards, he began to drive them out of the yard. He extinguished the candles in the synagogue, locked the door, and threw out the boys. Then he tried to turn against them the anger of the householders of the village. He told them of all their misdeeds—that they mocked at old people, and ridiculed the committee-men. In proof of his assertions, he showed the men a piece of paper that one of the boys had lost. On it was written a little poem.

Who would have thought it? A foolish poem, and yet what excitement it caused in the village—what a revolution. Oh! oh! It would have been better if Isshur had not found it, or having found it, had not shown it to the committee-men. It would have been far better for him. It may be said that this song was the beginning of Isshur's end. The foolish committee-men, instead of swallowing down the poem, and saying no more about it, injured themselves by discussing it. They carried it about from one to the other so long, until the people learnt it off by heart. Some one sang it to an old melody. And it spread everywhere. Workmen sang it at their work; cooks in their kitchens; young girls sitting on the doorsteps; mothers sang their babies to sleep with it. The most foolish song has a lot of power in it. When the throat is singing the head is thinking. And it thinks so long until it arrives at a conclusion. Thoughts whirl and whirl and fret one so long, until something results. And when one's imagination is enkindled, a story is sure to grow out of it.

Isshur the Beadle

The story that grew out of this song was fine and brief. You may listen to it. It may come in useful to you some day.

The heathens, insolent ones, fearless ones, devils and wretches burrowed so long, and worked so hard to overthrow Isshur, that they succeeded in arriving at a certain road. Early one morning they climbed into the attic of the synagogue. There they found the whole treasure—a pile of candles, several “poods” of wax, a score of new “*Tallissim*,” a bundle of prayer-books of different sorts that had never been used. It may be that to you these things would not have been of great value, but to a beadle they were worth a great deal. This treasure was taken down from the attic very ceremoniously. I will let you imagine the picture for yourself. On the one hand, Isshur with the big nose, terrifying eyebrows, and the beard of brass that started thick and heavy, and finished up with a few thin terrifying hairs. On the other hand, the young heathens, insolent ones, fearless ones, devils and wretches dragging out his treasure. But you need not imagine Isshur lost himself. He was not of the people that lose themselves for the least thing. He stood looking on, pretending to be puzzling himself with the question of how these things came to be in the attic of the synagogue.

Early next morning, the following announcement was written in chalk on the door of the synagogue:—

“Memorial candles are sold here at wholesale price.”

Jewish Children

Next day there was a different inscription. On the third day still another one. Isshur had something to do. Every morning he rubbed out with a wet rag the inscriptions that covered the whole of the door of the synagogue. Every Sabbath morning, on their desks the congregants found bundles of letters, in which the youngsters accused the beadle and his bought-over committee-men of many things.

Isshur had a hard time of it. He got the committee-men to issue a proclamation in big letters, on parchment.

"Hear all! As there have arisen in our midst a band of hooligans, scamps, good-for-nothings who are making false accusations against the most respected householders of the village, therefore we, the leaders of the community, warn these false accusers openly that we most strongly condemn their falsehoods, and if we catch any of them, we will punish him with all the severities of the law."

Of course, the boys at once tore down this proclamation. A second was hung in its place. The boys did not hesitate to hang up a proclamation of their own in its stead. And the men found on their desks fresh letters of accusation against the beadle and the committee-men. In a word, it was a period when the people did nothing else but write. The committee-men wrote proclamations, and the boys, the scamps, wrote letters. This went on until the Days of Mourning arrived—the time of the elections. And there began a struggle between the two factions. On the one side there was Isshur and his patrons, the committee-men; and on the

Isshur the Beadle

other side, the youngsters, the heathens, the scamps, and their candidates. Each faction tried to attract the most followers by every means in its power. One faction tried impassioned words, enflamed speeches; the other, soft words, roast ducks, dainties, and liberal promises. And just think who won? You will never guess. It was we young scamps who won. And we selected our own committee-men from amongst ourselves—young men with short coats, poor men, beggars. It is a shame to tell it, but we chose working men—ordinary working men.

• • • • •

I am afraid you are anxious for my story to come to an end. You want to know how long it is going to last? Or would you rather I told you how our new committee-men made up their accounts with the old beadle? Do you want to hear how the poor old beadle was dragged through the whole village by the youngsters, with shouting and singing? The boys carried in front of the procession the whole treasure of candles, wax, "*Tallissim*" and prayer-books which they had found in the attic of the synagogue. No, I don't think you will expect me to tell you of these happenings.

Take revenge of our enemy—bathe in his blood, so to speak? No! We could not do that. I shall tell you the end in a few words.

Last New Year I was at home, back again in the village of my birth. A lot, a lot of water had flown by since the time I have just told you of. Still, I found the synagogue on the same spot. And it had the same Ark of the Law, the same curtains,

Jewish Children

the same reader's-desk, and the same hanging candlesticks. But the people were different; they were greatly changed. It was almost impossible to recognize them. The old people of my day were all gone. No doubt there were a good many more stones and inscriptions in the holy place. The young folks had grown grey. The committee-men were new. The cantor was new. There was a new beadle, and new melodies, and new customs. Everything was new, and new, and new.

One day—it was "*Hoshana Rabba*"—the cantor sang with his choir, and the people kept beating their willow-twigs against the desks in front of them. (It seems this custom has remained unchanged.) And I noticed from the distance a very old man, white-haired, doubled-up, with a big nose, and terrifying eyebrows, and a beard that started thick and heavy, but finished up with a few straggling, terrifying hairs. I was attracted to this old man. I went over to him, and put out my hand.

"Peace be unto you!" I said. "I think you are '*Reb' Isshur* the beadle?"

"The beadle? What beadle? I am not the beadle this long time. I am a bare willow-twig this long time. Heh! heh!"

That is what the old man said to me in a tremulous voice. And he pointed to the bare willow-twigs at his feet. A bitter smile played around his grizzled beard that started thick and heavy, but finished off with a few straggling, terrifying hairs.

Boaz the Teacher

That which I felt on the first day my mother took me by the hand to "*Cheder*" must be what a little chicken feels, after one has made the sacrificial blessing over her and is taking her to be slaughtered. The little chicken struggles and flutters her wings. She understands nothing, but feels she is not going to have a good time, but something different. . . . It was not for nothing my mother comforted me, and told me a good angel would throw me down a "*groschen*" from the ceiling. It was not for nothing she gave me a whole apple and kissed me on the brow. It was not for nothing she asked Boaz to deal tenderly with me—just a little more tenderly because "the child has only recovered from the measles."

So said my mother, pointing to me, as if she were placing in Boaz's hands a rare vessel of crystal which, with one touch, would be a vessel no more—God forbid!

My mother went home happy and satisfied, and "the child that had only recovered from the measles," remained behind, alone. He cried a little, but soon wiped his eyes, and was introduced to the holiness of the "*Torah*" and a knowledge of the ways of the world. He waited for the good angel to throw him the "*groschen*" from the ceiling.

Jewish Children

Oh, that good angel—that good angell! It would have been better if my mother had never mentioned his name, because when Boaz came over, took hold of me with his dry, bony hand and thrust me into a chair at the table, I was almost faint, and I raised my head to the ceiling. I got a good portion from Boaz for this. He pulled me by the ear and shouted:

“Devil, what are you looking at?”

Of course, “the child that had only recovered from the measles” began to wail. It was then he had his first good taste of the teacher’s floggings. “A little boy must not look where it is forbidden. A little boy must not bleat like a calf.”

Boaz’s system of teaching was founded on one thing—whippings. Why whippings? He explained the reason by bringing forward the case of the horse. Why does a horse go? Because it is afraid. What is it afraid of? Whippings. And it is the same with a child. A child must be afraid. He must fear God and his teacher, and his father and his mother, a sin and a bad thought. And in order that a child should be really afraid, he must be laid down, in true style, and given a score or so lashes. There is nothing better in the world than the rod. May the whip live long!

So says Boaz. He takes the strap slowly in his hands, without haste, examines it on all sides as one examines a citron. Then he betakes himself to his work in good earnest, cheerfully singing a song by way of accompaniment.

Boaz the Teacher

Wonder of wonders! Boaz never counts the strokes, and never makes a mistake. Boaz flogs, and is never angry. Boaz is not a bad tempered man. He is only angry when a boy will not let himself be whipped, tries to tear himself free, or kicks out his legs. Then it is different. At such times Boaz's eyes are bloodshot, and he flogs without counting and without singing his little song. A little boy must be still while his teacher flogs him. A little boy must have manners, even when he is being flogged.

Boaz is also angry if a boy laughs when he is being whipped. (There are children who laugh when they are beaten. People say this is a disease.) To Boaz laughing is a danger to the soul. Boaz has never laughed as long as he is alive. And he hates to see any one else laughing. One might easily have promised the greatest reward to the person who could swear he once saw Boaz laughing. Boaz is not a man for laughter. His face is not made for it. If Boaz laughed, he would surely look more terrible than another man crying. (There are such faces in the world.) And really, what sort of a thing is laughter? It is only idlers who laugh, empty-headed gools, good-for-nothings, devil-may-care sort of people. Those who have to work for a living, or carry on their shoulders the burden of a knowledge of the Holy Law and of the ways of the world, have no time to laugh. Boaz never has time. He is either teaching or whipping. That is to say, he teaches while he whips, and whips while he teaches. It would be hard to divide these

Jewish Children

two—to say where teaching ended and whipping began.

And you must know that Boaz never whipped us for nothing. There was always a reason for it. It was either for not learning our lessons, for not wanting to pray well, for not obeying our fathers and mothers, for not looking in, and for not looking out, for just looking, for praying too quickly, for praying too slowly, for speaking too loudly, for speaking too softly, for a torn coat, a lost button, a pull or a push, for dirty hands, a soiled book, for being greedy, for running, for playing—and so on, and so on, without an end.

One might say we were whipped for every sin that a human being can commit. We were whipped for the sake of the next world as well as this world. We were whipped on the eve of every Sabbath, every feast and every fast. We were told that if we had not earned the whippings yet, we would earn them soon, please God. And Boaz gave us all the whippings we ought to have had from our friends and relatives. They gave the pleasant task in to his hands. Then we got whippings of which the teacher said:

“You surely know yourself what they are for.” And whippings just for nothing. “Let me see how a little boy lets himself be whipped.” In a word, it was whippings, rods, leathers, fears and tears. These prevailed at that time, in our foolish little world, without a single solution to the problems they brought into being, without a single remedy for the evils, without a single ray of hope that we

Boaz the Teacher

would ever free ourselves from the fiendish system under which we lived.

And the good angel of whom my mother spoke? Where was he—that good angel?

I must confess there were times when I doubted the existence of this good angel. Too early a spark of doubt entered my heart. Too early I began to think that perhaps my mother had fooled me. Too early I became acquainted with the emotion of hatred. Too early, too early, I began to hate my teacher Boaz.

And how could one help hating him? How, I ask you, could one help hating a teacher who does not allow you to lift your head? That you may not do—this you may not say. Don't stand here. Don't go there. Don't talk to So-and-so. How can one help hating a man who has not in him a germ of pity, who rejoices in another's pains, bathes in other's tears, and washes himself in other's blood? Can there be a more shameful word than flogging? And what can be more disgraceful than to strip anybody stark naked and put him in a corner? But even this was not enough for Boaz. He required you to undress yourself, to pull your own little shirt over your own head, and to stretch yourself face downwards. The rest Boaz managed.

And not only did Boaz flog the boys himself, but his assistants helped him—his lieutenants, as he called them, naturally under his direction, lest they might not deliver the full number of strokes. "A little less learning and a little more flogging,"

Jewish Children

was his rule. He explained the wisdom of his system in this way: "Too much learning dulls a boy, and a whipping too many does not hurt. Because, what a boy learns goes straight to his head, and his senses are quickened and his brains loaded. With the floggings it is the exact opposite. Before the effects of the flogging reach the brain the blood is purified, and by this means the brain is cleared. Well, do you understand?"

And Boaz never ceased from purifying our blood, and clearing our brain. And woe unto us! We did not believe any more in the good angel that looked down upon us from above. We realized that it was only a fairy-tale, an invented story by which we were fooled into going to Boaz's "*Cheder*." And we began to sigh and groan because of our sufferings under Boaz. And we also began to make plans, to talk and argue how to free ourselves from our galling slavery.

In the melancholy moments between daylight and darkness, when the fiery red sun is about to bid farewell to the cold earth for the night—in these melancholy moments, when the happy daylight is departing, and on its heels is treading silently the still night, with its lonely secrets—in these melancholy moments, when the shadows are climbing on the walls growing broader and longer—in these melancholy moments between the afternoon and the evening prayers, when the teacher is at the synagogue, and his wife is milking the goat or washing the crockery, or making the

Boaz the Teacher

"Borsht"—then we youngsters came together at *"Cheder,"* beside the stove. We sat on the floor, our legs curled up under us, like innocent lambs. And there in the evening darkness, we talked of our terrible Titus, our angel of death, Boaz. The bigger boys, who had been at *"Cheder"* some time, told us the most awful tales of Boaz. They swore by all the oaths they could think of that Boaz had flogged more than one boy to death, that he had already driven three women into their graves, and that he had buried his one and only son. We heard such wild tales that our hair stood on end. The older boys talked, and the younger listened—listened with all their senses on the alert. Black eyes gleamed in the darkness. Young hearts palpitated. And we decided that Boaz had no soul. He was a man without a soul. And such a man is compared to an animal, to an evil spirit that it is a righteous act to get rid of. Thousands of plans, foolish, childish plans, were formed in our childish brains. We hoped to rid ourselves of our angel of death, as we called Boaz. Foolish children! These foolish plans buried themselves deep in each little heart that cried out to the Lord to perform a miracle. We asked that either the books should be burnt, or the strap he whipped us with taken to the devil, or—or . . . No one wished to speak of the last alternative. They were afraid to bring it to their lips. And the evil spirit worked in their hearts. The young fancies were enkindled, and the boys were carried away by golden dreams. They dreamed of freedom, of running down hill, of wading barefoot in

Jewish Children

the river, playing horses, jumping over the logs. They were good, sweet, foolish dreams that were not destined to be realized. There was heard a familiar cough, a familiar footfall. And our hearts were frozen. All our limbs were paralysed, deadened. We sat down at the table and started our lessons with as much enthusiasm as if we were starting for the gallows. We were reading aloud, but still our lips muttered: "Father in Heaven, will there never come an end to this tyrant, this Pharaoh, this Haman, this Gog-Magog? Or will there ever come a time when we shall be rid of this hard, hopeless, dark tyranny? No, never, never!"

That is the conclusion we arrived at, poor innocent, foolish children!

• • • • •
"Children, do you want to hear of a good plan that will rid us of our Gog-Magog?"

That was what one of the boys asked us on one of those melancholy moments already described. His name was Velvel Leib Aryas. He was a young heathen. When he was speaking his eyes gleamed in the darkness like those of a wolf. And the whole school of boys crowded around Velvel to hear the plan by which we might get rid of our Gog-Magog. Velvel began his explanation by giving us a lecture—how impossible it was to stand Boaz any longer, how the Ashmodai was bathing in our blood, how he regarded us as dogs—worse than dogs, because when a dog is beaten with a stick it may, at any rate, howl. And we may not

Boaz the Teacher

do that either. And so on, and so on. After this Velvel said to us:

"Listen, children, to what I will ask you. I am going to ask you something."

"Ask it," we all cried in one voice.

"What is the law in a case where, for example, one of us suddenly becomes ill?"

"It is not good," we replied.

"No, I don't mean that. I mean something else. I mean, if one of us is ill does he go to '*Cheder*,' or does he stay at home?"

"Of course he stays at home," we all answered together.

"Well, what is the law if two of us get ill?"

"Two remain at home."

"Well, and if three get ill?" Velvel went on asking us, and we went on answering him.

"Three stay at home."

"What would happen if, for example, we all took ill?"

"We should all stay at home."

"Then let a sickness come upon us all," he cried joyfully. We replied angrily:

"The Lord forbid! Are you mad, or have you lost your reason?"

"I am not mad, and I have not lost my reason. Only you are fools, yes. Do I mean that we are to be really ill? I mean that we are to pretend to be ill, so that we shall not have to go to '*Cheder*'. Do you understand me now?"

When Velvel had explained his plan to us, we began to understand it, and to like it. And we

Jewish Children

began to ask ourselves what sort of an illness we should suffer from. One suggested toothache, another headache, a third stomach-ache, a fourth worms. But we decided that it was not going to be toothache, nor headache, nor stomach-ache, nor worms. What then? We must all together complain of pains in our feet, because the doctor could decide whether we really suffered from any of the other illnesses or not. But if we told him we had pains in our feet, and were unable to move them, he could do nothing.

"Remember, children, you are not to get out of bed tomorrow morning. And so that we may all be certain that not one of us will come to '*Cheder*' tomorrow, let us promise one another, take an oath."

So said our comrade Velvel. And we gave each other our promise, and took an oath that we would not be at "*Cheder*" next morning. We went home from "*Cheder*" that evening lively, joyful, and singing. We felt like giants who knew how to overcome the enemy and win the battle.

The Spinning-Top

More than any of the boys at "*Cheder*," more than any boy of the town, and more than any person in the world, I loved my friend, Benny "*Polkovoi*." The feeling I had for him was a peculiar combination of love, devotion, and fear. I loved him because he was handsomer, cleverer and smarter than any other boy. He was kind and faithful to me. He took my part, fought for me, and pulled the ears of those boys who annoyed me.

And I was afraid of him because he was big and quarrelsome. He could beat whom he liked, and when he liked. He was the biggest, oldest, and wealthiest boy in the "*Cheder*." His father, Mayer "*Polkovoi*," though he was only a regimental tailor, was nevertheless a rich man, and played an important part in public affairs. He had a fine house, a seat in the synagogue beside the ark. At the Passover, his "*Matzo*" was baked first. At the feast of Tabernacles his citron was the best. On the Sabbath he always had a poor man to meals. He gave away large sums of money in charity. And he himself went to the house of another to lend him money as a favour. He engaged the best teachers for his children. In a word, Mayer "*Polkovoi*" tried to refine himself—to be a man

Jewish Children

amongst men. He wanted to get his name inscribed in the books of the best society, but did not succeed. In our town, Mazapevka, it was not easy to get into the best society. We did not forget readily a man's antecedents. A tailor may try to refine himself for twenty years in succession, but he will still remain a tailor to us. I do not think there is a soap in the world that will wash out this stain. How much do you think Mayer "*Polkovoi*" would have given to have us blot out the name bestowed upon him, "*Polkovoi*"? His misfortune was that his family was a thousand times worse than his name. Just imagine! In his passport he was called Mayor Mofsovitch Heifer.

It is a remarkable thing. May Mayer's great-great-grandfather have a bright Paradise! He also must have been a tailor. When it came to giving himself a family name, he could not find a better one than Heifer. He might have called himself Thimble, Lining, Buttonhole, Bigpatch, Longfigure. These are not family names either, it is true, but they are in some way connected with tailoring. But Heifer? What did he like in the name of Heifer? You may ask why not Goat? Are there not people in the world called Goat? You may say what you like, Heifer and Goat are equally nice. Still, they are not the same. A Heifer is not a Goat.

But we will return to my friend Benny.

Benny was a nice boy, with yellow tousled hair, white puffed-out cheeks, scattered teeth, and peculiar

The Spinning Top

red, bulging, fishy eyes. These red, fishy eyes were always smiling and roguish. He had a turned-up nose. His whole face had an expression of impudence. Nevertheless, I liked his face, and we became friends the first hour we met.

We met for the first time at "*Cheder*," at the 'teachers' table. When my mother took me to "*Cheder*," the teacher was sitting at his table with the boys, teaching them the book of Genesis. He was a man with thick eyebrows and a pointed cap. He made no fuss of me. He asked me no questions, neither did he take my measurements, but said to me—

"Get over there, on that bench, between those two boys."

I got on the bench, between the boys, and was already a pupil. There was no talk between my mother and the teacher. They had made all arrangements beforehand.

"Remember to learn as you ought," said my mother from the doorway. She turned to look at me again, lovingly, joyfully. I understood her look very well. She was pleased that I was sitting with nice children, and learning the "*Torah*." And she was pained because she had to part with me.

I must confess I felt much happier than my mother. I was amongst a crowd of new friends —may no evil eye harm them! They looked at me, and I looked at them. But the teacher did not let us idle for long. He shook himself, and shouted aloud the lesson we had to repeat after him at the top of our voices.

Jewish Children

"Now the serpent was more subtil than any beast of the field."

Boys who sit so close together, though they shake and shout aloud, cannot help getting to know one another, or exchange a few words. And so it was.

Benny "*Polkovoi*," who sat crushing me, pinched my leg, and looked into my eyes. He went on shaking himself, and shouting out the lesson with the teacher and the other boys. But he threw his own words into the middle of the sentence we were translating.

"And Adam knew (here are buttons for you) Eve his wife. (Give me a locust-bean and I will give you a pull of my cigarette.)"

I felt a warm hand in mine, and I had some smooth buttons. I confess I did not want the buttons, and I had no locust-beans, neither did I smoke cigarettes. But I liked the idea of the thing. And I replied in the same tones in which the lesson was being recited:

"And she conceived and bare Cain. (Who told you I have locust-beans?)"

That is how we conversed the whole time, until the teacher suspected that though I shook myself to and fro, my mind was far from the lesson. He suddenly put me through an examination.

"Listen, you, whatever your name is, you surely know whose son Cain was, and the name of his brother?"

This question was as strange to me as if he had asked me when there would be a fair in the sky, or how to make cream-cheese from snow, so that they

The Spinning Top

should not melt. In reality my mind was elsewhere, I don't know where.

"Why do you look at me so?" asked the teacher. "Don't you hear me? I want you to tell me the name of the first man, and the story of Cain and his brother Abel."

The boys were smiling, smothering their laughter. I did not know why.

"Fool, say you do not know, because we have not learnt it," whispered Benny in my ear, digging me with his elbow. I repeated his words, like a parrot. And the "*Cheder*" was filled with loud laughter.

"What are they laughing at?" I asked myself. I looked at them, and at the teacher. All were rolling with laughter. And, at that moment, I counted the buttons from one hand into the other. There were exactly half a dozen.

"Well, little boy, show me your hands. What are you doing with them?" And the teacher bent down and looked under the table.

You are clever boys, and you will understand yourselves what I had from the teacher, for the buttons, on my first day at "*Cheder*."

Whippings heal up; shame is forgotten. Benny and I became good friends. We were one soul. This is how it came about:—

Next morning I arrived at "*Cheder*" with my Bible in one hand and my dinner in the other. The boys were excited, jolly. Why? The teacher was not there. What had happened? He had gone off to a Circumcision with his wife. That is to say,

Jewish Children

not with her, God forbid! A teacher never walks with his wife. The teacher walks before, and his wife after him.

"Let us make a bet," cried a boy with a blue nose. His name was Hosea Hessel.

"How much shall we bet?" asked another boy, Koppel Bunnas. He had a torn sleeve out of which peeped the point of a dirty elbow.

"A quarter of the locust-beans."

"Let it be a quarter of the locust-beans. What for? Let us hear."

"I say he will not stand more than twenty-five."

"And I say thirty-six."

"Thirty-six. We shall soon see. Boys, take hold of him."

This was the order of Hosea Hessel, of the blue nose. And several boys took hold of me, all together, turned me over on the bench, face upwards. Two sat on my legs, two on my arms, and one held my head, so that I should not be able to wriggle. And another placed his left forefinger and thumb at my nose. (It seemed he was left-handed.) He curled up his finger and thumb, closed his eye, and began to fillip me on the nose. And how, do you think? Each time I saw my father in the other world: Murderers, slaughterers! What had they against my nose? What had it done to them? Whom had it bothered? What had they seen on it—a nose like all noses.

"Boys, count," commanded Hosea Hessel.
"One, two, three—"

But suddenly . . .

The Spinning Top

Nearly always, since ever the world began, when a misfortune happens to a man—when robbers surround him in a wood, bind his hands, sharpen their knives, tell him to say his prayers, and are about to finish him off, there comes a woodman with a bell. The robbers run away, and the man lifts his hands on high and praises the Lord for his deliverance.

It was just like that with me and my nose. I don't remember whether it was at the fifth or sixth blow that the door opened, and Benny "*Polkovoi*" came in. The boys freed me at once, and remained standing like blocks of wood. Benny took them in hand, one by one. He caught each boy by the ear, twisted it round, and said:

"Well, now you will know what it means to meddle with a widow's boy."

From that day the boys did not touch either me or my nose. They were afraid to begin with the widow's boy whom Benny had taken under his wing, into his guardianship, under his protection.

• • • • •
"The widow's boy"—I had no other name at "*Cheder*." This was because my mother was a widow. She supported herself by her own work. She had a little shop in which were, for the most part, so far as I can remember, chalk and locust-beans—the two things that sell best in *Mazapevka*. Chalk is wanted for white-washing the houses, and locust-beans are a luxury. They are sweet, and they are light in weight, and they are cheap. Schoolboys spend on them all the money they get for

Jewish Children

breakfast and dinner. And the shopkeepers make a good profit out of them. I could never understand why my mother was always complaining that she could hardly make enough to pay the rent and my school-fees. Why school-fees? What about the other things a human being needs, food and clothes and boots, for example? She thought of nothing but the school-fees. "When the Lord punished me," she wailed, "and took my husband from me—and such a husband!—and left me all alone, I want my son to be a scholar, at any rate." What do you say to that? Do you think she did not come frequently to the "*Cheder*" to find out how I was getting on? I say nothing of the prayers she took good care I should recite every morning. She was always lecturing me to be even half as good as my father—peace be unto him! And whenever she looked at me, she said I was exactly like him—may I have longer years than he! And her eyes grew moist. Her face grew curiously careworn, and had a mournful expression.

I hope he will forgive me, I mean my father, from the other world, but I could not understand what sort of a man he had been. From what my mother told of him, he was always either praying or studying. Had he never been drawn, like me, out into the open, on summer mornings, when the sun was not burning yet, but was just beginning to show in the sky, marching rapidly onwards, a fiery angel, in a fiery chariot, drawn by fiery horses, into whose brilliant, burning, guinea-gold faces it was impossible to look? I ask you what taste have

The Spinning Top

the week-day prayers on such a morning? What sort of a pleasure is it to sit and read in a stuffy room, when the golden sun is burning, and the air is hot as an iron frying-pan? At such a time, you are tempted to run down the hill, to the river—the beautiful river that is covered with a green slime. A peculiar odour, as of a warm bath, comes from the distance. You want to undress and jump into the warm water. Under the trees it is cool and the mud is soft and slippery. And the curious insects that live at the bottom of the river whirl around and about before your eyes. And curious, long-legged flies slip and slide on the surface of the water. At such a time one desires to swim over to the other side—over to where the green flags grow, their yellow and white stalks shimmering in the sun. A green, fresh fern looks up at you, and you go after it, splash-splash into the water, hands down, and feet up, so that people might think you were swimming. I ask you again, what pleasure is it to sit in a little room on a summer's evening, when the great dome of the sky is dropping over the other side of the town, lighting up the spire of the church, the shingle roofs of the baths, and the big windows of the synagogue. And on the other side of the town, on the common, the goats are bleating, and the lambs are frisking, the dust rising to the heavens, the frogs croaking. There is a tearing and a shrieking and a tumult as at a regular fair. Who thinks of praying at such a time? But if you talk to my mother, she will tell you that her husband—peace be unto him!—did not succumb to temptations.

Jewish Children

He was a different sort of a man. What sort of a man he was I do not know—asking his pardon. I only know that my mother annoys me very much. She reminds me every minute that I had a father; and throws it into my teeth that she has to pay my school-fees for me. For this she asks only two things of me—that I should learn diligently, and say my prayers willingly.

It could not be said that the widow's boy did not learn well. He was not in any way behind his comrades. But I cannot guarantee that he said his prayers willingly. All children are alike. And he was as mischievous as any other boy. He, like the rest, was fond of running away and playing, though there is not much to be said of the play of Jewish children. They tie a paper bag to a cat's tail so that she may run through the house like mad, smashing everything in her way. They lock the women's portion of the synagogue from the outside on Friday nights, so that the women may have to be rescued. They nail the teacher's shoes to the floor, or seal his beard to the table with wax when he is asleep. But oh, how many thrashings do they get when their tricks are found out! It may be gathered that everything must have an originator, a commander, a head, a leader who shows the way.

Our leader, our commander was Benny "*Polkovoi*." From him all things originated; and on our heads were the consequences. Benny, of the fat face and red, fishy eyes, always managed to

The Spinning Top

escape scot free from the scrapes. He was always innocent as a dove. Whatever tricks or mischief we did, we always got the idea from Benny. Who taught us to smoke cigarettes in secret, letting the smoke out through our nostrils? Benny. Who told us to slide on the ice, in winter, with the peasant-boys? Benny. Who taught us to gamble with buttons—to play “odd or even,” and lose our breakfasts and dinners? Benny. He was up to every trick, and taught us them all. He won our last “*groschens*” from us. And when it came to anything, Benny had disappeared. Playing was to us the finest thing in the world. And for playing we got the severest thrashings from our teacher. He said he would tear out of us the desire to play.

“Play in my house? You will play with the Angel of Death,” said the teacher. And he used to empty our pockets of everything, and thrash us most liberally.

But there was one week of the year when we were allowed to play. Why do I say allowed? It was a righteous thing to play then.

And that week was the week of “*Chanukah*.” And we played with spinning-tops.

It is true that the games of cards—bridge and whist, for example—which are played at “*Chanukah*” nowadays have more sense in them than the old game of spinning-tops. But when the play is for money, it makes no difference what it is. I once saw two peasant-boys beating one another’s heads against the wall. When I asked them why

Jewish Children

they were doing this, if they were out of their minds, they told me to go my road. They were playing a game, for money, which of them would get tired the soonest of having his head banged on the wall.

The game of spinning-tops that have four corners, each marked with a letter of the alphabet, and are like dice, is very exciting. One can lose one's soul playing it. It is not so much the loss of the money as the annoyance of losing. Why should the other win? Why should the top fall on the letter G for him, and on the N for you? I suppose you know what the four letters stand for? N means no use. H means half. B means bad. And G means good. The top is a sort of lottery. Whoever is fortunate wins. Take, for example, Benny "*Polkovoi*." No matter how often he spins the top, it always falls on the letter G.

The boys said it was curious how Benny won. They kept putting down their money. He took on their bets. What did he care? He was a rich boy.

"G again. It's curious," they cried, and again opened their purses and staked their money. Benny whirled the top. It spun round and round, and wobbled from side to side, like a drunkard, and fell down.

"G," said Benny.

"G, G. Again G. It's extraordinary," said the boys, scratching their heads and again opening their purses.

The game grew more exciting. The players

The Spinning Top

grew hot, staked their money, crushed one another, and dug one another in the ribs to get nearer the table, and called each other peculiar names—"Black Tom-cat! Creased Cap! Split Coat!" and the like. They did not see the teacher standing behind them, in his woollen cap and coat, and carrying his "*Tallis*" and "*Tephilin*" under his arm. He was going to the synagogue to say his prayers, and seeing the crowd of excited boys, he drew near to watch the play. This day he does not interfere. It is "*Chanukah*." We are free for eight days on end, and may play as much as we like. But we must not fight, nor pull one another by the nose. The teacher's wife took her sickly child in her arms, and stood at her husband's shoulder, watching the boys risk their money, and how Benny took on all the bets. Benny was excited, burning, aflame, ablaze. He twirled the top. It spun round and round, wobbled and fell down.

"G all over again. It's a regular pantomime."

Benny showed us his smartness and his quick-wittedness so long, until our pockets were empty. He thrust his hands in his pockets, as if challenging us—"Well, who wants more?"

We all went home. We carried away with us the heartache and the shame of our losses. When we got home, we had to tell lies to account for the loss of the money we had been given in honour of "*Chanukah*." One boy confessed he had spent his on locust-beans. Another said the money had been stolen out of his pocket the previous night. A third came home crying. He said he had bought

Jewish Children

himself a pocket-knife. Well, why was he crying? He had lost the knife on his way home.

I told my mother a fine story—a regular “Arabian Nights” tale, and got out of her a second “*Chanukah*” present of ten “*groschens*.” I ran off with them to Benny, played for five minutes, lost to him, and flew back home, and told my mother another tale. In a word, brains were at work and heads were busy inventing lies. Lies flew about like chaff in the wind. And all our “*Chanukah*” money went into Benny’s pockets, and was lost to us for ever.

One of the boys became so absorbed in the play that he was not satisfied to lose only his “*Chanukah*” money, but went on gambling through the whole eight days of the festival.

And that boy was no other than myself, “the widow’s son.”

You must not ask where the widow’s boy got the money to play with. The great gamblers of the world who have lost and won fortunes, estates and inheritances—they will know and understand. Woe is me! May the hour never be known on which the evil spirit of gambling takes hold of one! There is nothing too hard for him. He breaks into houses, gets through iron walls, and does the most terrible thing imaginable. It’s a name to conjure with—the spirit of gambling.

First of all, I began to make money by selling everything I possessed, one thing after the other, my pocket-knife, my purse, and all my buttons. I had a box that opened and closed, and some wheels

The Spinning Top

of an old clock—good brass wheels that shone like the sun when they were polished. I sold them all at any price, flew off, and lost all my money to Benny. I always left him with a heart full of wounds and the bitterest annoyance, and greatly excited. I was not angry with Benny. God forbid! What had I against him? How was he to blame if he always won at play? If the top fell on the G for me, he said, I should win. If it falls on the G for him, then he wins. And he is quite right. No, I am only sorry for myself, for having run through so much money—my mother's hard-earned "*groschens*," and for having made away with all my things. I was left almost naked. I even sold my little prayer-book. O that prayer-book, that prayer-book! When I think of it, my heart aches, and my face burns with shame. It was an ornament, not a book. My mother bought it of Pethachiah the pedlar, on the anniversary of my father's death. And it was a book of books—a good one, a real good one, thick, and full of everything. It had every prayer one could mention, the "Song of Songs," the Ethics of the Fathers, and the Psalms, and the "*Haggadah*," and all the prayers of the whole year round. Then the print and the binding, and the gold lettering. It was full of everything, I tell you. Each time Pethachiah the pedlar came round with his cut moustache that made his careworn face appear as if it was smiling—each time he came round and opened his pack outside the synagogue door, I could not take my eyes off that prayer-book.

"What would you say, little boy?" asked

Jewish Children

Pethachiah, as if he did not know that I had my eyes on the prayer-book, and had had it in my hands seventeen times, each time asking the price of it.

“Nothing,” I replied. “Just so!” And I left him, so as not to be tempted.

“Ah, mother, you should see the fine thing Pethachiah the pedlar has.”

“What sort of a thing?” asked my mother.

“A little prayer-book. If I had such a prayer-book, I would—I don’t know myself what I would do.”

“Haven’t you got a prayer-book? And where is your father’s prayer-book?”

“You can’t compare them. This is an ornament, and my book is only a book.”

“An ornament?” repeated my mother. “Are there then more prayers in an ornamental book, or do the prayers sound better?”

Well, how can you explain an ornament to your mother—a really fine book with red covers, and blue edges, and a green back?

“Come,” said my mother to me, one evening, taking me by the hand. “Come with me to the synagogue. Tomorrow is the anniversary of your father’s death. We will bring candles to be lit for him, and at the same time we will see what sort of a prayer-book it is that Pethachiah has.”

I knew beforehand that on the anniversary of the death of my father, I could get from my mother anything I asked for, even to the little plate from heaven, as the saying is. And my heart beat with joy.

The Spinning Top

When we got to the synagogue, we found Pethachiah with his pack still unopened. You must know Pethachiah was a man who never hurried. He knew very well he was the only man at the fair. His customers would never leave him. Before he opened his pack and spread out his goods, it took a year. I trembled, I shook. I could hardly stand on my feet. And he did not care. It was as if we were not talking to him at all.

"Let me see what sort of a prayer-book it is you have," said my mother.

Pethachiah had plenty of time. The river was not on fire. Slowly, without haste, he opened his pack, and spread out his wares—big Bibles, little prayer-books for men, and for women, big Psalm books and little, and books for all possible occasions, without an end. Then there were books of tales from the "*Talmud*," tales of the "*Bal-shem-tov*," books of sermons, and books of devotion. I imagined he would never run short. He was a well, a fountain. At last he came to the little books, and handed out the one I wanted.

"Is this all?" asked my mother. "Such a little one."

"This little one is dearer than a big one," answered Pethachiah.

"And how much do you want for the little squirrel?—God forgive me for calling it by that name."

"You call a prayer-book a squirrel?" asked Pethachiah. He took the book slowly out of her hand; and my heart was torn.

Jewish Children

"Well, say. How much is it?" asked my mother. But Pethachiah had plenty of time. He answered her in a sing-song:

"How much is the little prayer-book? It will cost you—it will cost you—I am afraid it is not for your purse."

My mother cursed her enemies, that they might have black, hideous dreams, and asked him to say how much.

Pethachiah stated the price. My mother did not answer him. She turned towards the door, took my hand, and said to me:

"Come, let us go. We have nothing to do here. Don't you know that '*Reb*' Pethachiah is a man who charges famine prices?"

I followed my mother to the door. And though my heart was heavy, I still hoped the Lord would pity us, and Pethachiah would call us back. But Pethachiah was not that sort of a man. He knew we should turn back of our own accord. And so it was. My mother turned round, and asked him to talk like a man. Pethachiah did not stir. He looked at the ceiling. And his pale face shone. We went off, and returned once again.

"A curious Jew, Pethachiah," said my mother to me afterwards. "May my enemies have the plague if I would have bought the prayer-book from him. It is at a famine price. As I live, it is a sin. The money could have gone for your school-fees. But it's useless. For the sake of tomorrow, the anniversary of your father's death—peace be unto him!—I have bought you the prayer-

The Spinning Top

book, as a favour. And now, my son, you must do me a favour in return. Promise me that you will say your prayers faithfully every day."

Whether I really prayed as faithfully as I had promised, or not, I will not tell you. But I loved the little book as my life. You may understand that I slept with it, though, as you know, it is forbidden. The whole "*Cheder*" envied me the little book. I minded it as if it were the apple of my eye. And now, this "*Chanukah*"—woe unto me!—I carried it off with my own hands to Moshe the carpenter's boy, who had long had his eye on it. And I had to beg of him, for an hour on end, before he bought it. I almost gave it away for nothing—the little prayer-book. My heart faints and my face burns with shame. Sold! And to what end? For whose sake? For Benny's sake, that he might win off me another few "*kopeks*." But how is Benny to blame if he wins at play?

"That's what a spinning-top is for," explained Benny, putting into his purse my last few "*grosschens*." "If things went with you as they are going with me, then you would be winning. But I am lucky, and I win."

And Benny's cheeks glowed. It is bright and warm in the house. A silver "*Chanukah*" lamp is burning the best oil. Everything is fine. From the kitchen comes a delicious odour of freshly melted goose-fat.

"We are having fritters tonight," Benny told me in the doorway. My heart was weak with hunger. I flew home in my torn sheep-skin. My

Jewish Children

mother had come in from her shop. Her hands were red and swollen with the cold. She was frozen through and through, and was warming herself at the stove. Seeing me, her face lit up with pleasure.

“From the synagogue?” she asked.

“From the synagogue,” was my lying answer.

“Have you said the evening prayer?”

“I have said the evening prayer,” was my second lie to her.

“Warm yourself, my son. You will say the blessing over the ‘*Chanukah*’ lights. It is the last night of ‘*Chanukah*’ tonight, thank God!”

If a man had only troubles to bear, without a scrap of pleasure, he would never get over them, but would surely take his own life. I am referring to my mother, the widow, poor thing, who worked day and night, froze, never had enough to eat, and never slept enough for my sake. Why should she not have a little pleasure too? Every person puts his own meaning into the word “pleasure.” To my mother there was no greater pleasure in the world than hearing me recite the blessings on Sabbaths and Festivals. At the Passover I carried out the “*Seder*” for her, and at “*Chanukah*” I made the blessing over the lights. Was the blessing over wine or beer? Had we for the Passover fritters or fresh “*matzo*”? What were the “*Chanukah*” lights—a silver, eight-branched lamp with olive oil, or candles stuck in pieces of potato? Believe me, the pleasure has nothing to do with wine

The Spinning Top

or fritters, or a silver lamp. The main thing is the blessing itself. To see my mother's face when I was praying, how it shone and glowed with pleasure was enough. No words are necessary, no detailed description, to prove that this was unalloyed happiness to her, real pleasure. I bent over the potatoes, and recited the blessing in a sing-song voice. She repeated the blessing after me, word for word, in the same sing-song. She looked into my eyes, and moved her lips. I knew she was thinking at the time: "It is he—he in every detail. May the child have longer years!" And I felt I deserved to be cut to pieces like the potatoes. Surely, I had deceived my mother, and for such a base cause. I had betrayed her from head to foot.

The candles in the potatoes—my "*Chanukah*" lights—flickered and flickered until they went out. And my mother said to me:

"Wash your hands. We are having potatoes and goose-fat for supper. In honour of '*Chanukah*,' I bought a little measure of goose-fat—fresh, beautiful fat."

I washed myself with pleasure, and we sat down to supper.

"It is a custom amongst some people to have fritters for supper on the last night of '*Chanukah*,'" said my mother, sighing. And there arose to my mind Benny's fritters, and Benny's spinning-top that had cost me all I possessed in the world. I had a sharp pain at my heart. More than all, I regretted the little prayer-book. But, of what use were regrets? It was all over and done with.

Jewish Children

Even in my sleep I had uneasy thoughts. I heard my mother's groans. I heard her bed creaking, and I imagined that it was my mother groaning. Out of doors, the wind was blowing, rattling the windows, tearing at the roof, whistling down the chimney, sighing loudly. A cricket had come to our house a long time before. It was now chirping from the wall, "Tchireree! Tchireree!" And my mother did not cease from sighing and groaning. And each sigh and each groan echoed itself in my heart. I only just managed to control myself. I was on the point of jumping out of bed, falling at my mother's feet, kissing her hands, and confessing to her all my sins. I did not do this. I covered myself with all the bed-clothes, so that I might not hear my mother sighing and groaning and her bed creaking. My eyes closed. The wind howled, and the cricket chirped, "Tchireree! Tchireree! Tchireree! Tchireree!" And there spun around before my eyes a man like a top—a man I seemed to know. I could have sworn it was the teacher in his pointed cap. He was spinning on one foot, round, and round, and round. His cap sparkled, his eyes glistened, and his earlocks flew about. No, it was not the teacher. It was a spinning-top—a curious, living top with a pointed cap and earlocks. By degrees the teacher-top, or the top-teacher ceased from spinning round. And in its place stood Pharaoh, the king of Egypt whose story we had learnt a week ago. Pharaoh, king of Egypt, stood naked before me. He had

The Spinning Top

only just come out of the river. He had my little prayer-book in his hand. I could not make out how that wicked king, who had bathed in Jewish blood, came to have my prayer-book. And I saw seven cows, lean and starved, mere skin and bones, with big horns and long ears. They came to me one after the other. They opened their mouths and tried to swallow me. Suddenly, there appeared my friend Benny. He took hold of their long ears, and twisted them round. Some one was crying softly, sobbing, wailing, howling, and chirping. A man stood near me. He was not a human being. He said to me softly:

“Tell me, son, on which day do you recite the mourner’s prayer for me?”

I understood that this was my father of whom my mother had told me so many good things. I wanted to tell him the day on which I must say the mourner’s prayer for him, but I had forgotten it. I fretted myself. I rubbed my forehead, and tried to remind myself of the day, but I could not. Did you ever hear the like? I forgot the day of the anniversary of my father’s death. Listen, Jewish children, can you not tell me when the day is? Why are you silent? Help! Help! Help!

“God be with you! Why are shouting? Why do you shriek? What is the matter with you? May the Lord preserve you!”

You will understand it was my mother who was speaking to me. She held my head. I could feel

Jewish Children

her trembling and shaking. The lowered lamp gave out no light, but an oppressive stench. I saw my mother's shadow dancing on the wall. The points of the kerchief she wore on her head were like two horns. Her eyes gleamed horribly in the darkness.

"When do I say the mourner's prayer, mother? Tell me, when do I say the mourner's prayer?"

"God be with you! The anniversary of your father's death was not long ago. You have had a bad dream. Spit out three times. Tfu! Tfu! Tfu! May it be for a good sign! Amen! Amen! Amen!"

Children, I grew up, and Benny grew up. He became a young man with a yellowish beard and a round belly. He wears a gold chain across it. It seems he is a rich man.

We met in the train. I recognized him by his fishy, bulging eyes and his scattered teeth. We had not met for a long time. We kissed one another and talked of the good old times, the dear good days of our childhood, and the foolish things we did then.

"Do you remember, Benny, that '*Chanukah*' when you won everything with the spinning top? The G always fell for you."

I looked at Benny. He was convulsed with laughter. He held his sides. He was rolling over. He was actually choking with laughter.

"God be with you, Benny! Why this sudden burst of laughter, Benny?"

"Oh!" he cried, "oh! go away with your spinning-

The Spinning Top

top! That was a good top. It was a real top. It was a pudding made only of suet. It was a stew of nothing but raisins."

"What sort of a top was it, Benny? Tell me quicker."

"It was a top that had all around it, on all the corners only the one letter, G."

Esther

I am not going to tell you a story of "*Cheder*," or of the teacher, or of the teacher's wife. I have told you enough about them. Perhaps you will allow me, this time, in honour of the feast of "*Purim*," to tell you a story of the teacher's daughter, Esther.

If the Esther of the Bible was as beautiful a creature as the Esther of my story, then it is no wonder she found favour in the eyes of King Ahasuerus. The Esther of whom I am going to tell you was loved by everybody, everybody, even by me and by my older brother Mottel, although he was "*Bar-mitzvah*" long ago, and they were making up a match for him, and he was wearing a watch and chain this good while. (If I am not mistaken, he had already started to grow a beard at the time I speak of.) And that my brother Mottel loves Esther, I am positive. He thinks I do not know that his going to "*Cheder*" every Sabbath to read with the teacher is a mere pretext, a yesterday's day! The teacher snores loudly. The teacher's wife stands on the doorstep talking with the women. We boys play around the room, and Mottel and

Esther

Esther are staring—she at him, and he at her. It sometimes happens that we boys play at “blind-man’s-buff.” Do you know what “blind-man’s-buff” is? Well, then I will tell you. You take a boy, bandage his eyes with a handkerchief, place him in the middle of the floor, and all the boys fly round him crying: “Blindman, blindman, catch me!”

Mottel and Esther also play at “blind-man’s-buff” with us. They like the game because, when they are playing it, they can chase one another—she him, and he her.

And I have many more proofs I could give you that—But I am not that sort.

I once caught them holding hands, he hers, and she his. And it was not on the Sabbath either, but on a weekday. It was towards evening, between the afternoon and the evening prayers. He was pretending to go to the synagogue. He strayed into “*Cheder*.” “Where is the teacher?” “The teacher is not here.” And he went and gave her his hand, Esther, that is. I saw them. He withdrew his hand and gave me a “*groschen*” to tell no one. I asked two, and he gave me two. I asked three, and he gave me three. What do you think—if I had asked four, or five, or six, would he not have given them? But I am not that sort.

Another time, too, something happened. But enough of this. I will rather tell you the real story—the one I promised you.

As I told you, my brother Mottel is grown up.

Jewish Children

He does not go to "*Cheder*" any more, nor does he wish to learn anything at home. For this, my father calls him "Man of clay." He has no other name for him. My mother does not like it. What sort of a habit is it to call a young man, almost a bridegroom, a man of clay? My father says he is nothing else but a man of clay. They quarrel about it. I do not know what other parents do, but my parents are always quarrelling. Day and night they are quarrelling.

If I were to tell you how my father and mother quarrel, you would split your sides laughing. But I am not that sort.

In a word, my brother Mottel does not go to "*Cheder*" any more. Nevertheless, he does not forget to send the teacher a "*Purim*" present. Having been a pupil of his he sends him a nice poem in Hebrew, illuminated with a "Shield of David," and two paper "*roubles*." With whom does he send this "*Purim*" present? With me, of course. My brother says to me, "Here, hand the teacher this "*Purim*" present. When you come back, I will give you ten '*groschens*.'" Ten "*groschens*" is money. But what then? I want the money now. My brother said I was a heathen. Said I: "It may be I am a heathen. I will not argue about it. But I want to see the money," said I. Who do you think won?

He gave me the ten "*groschens*," and handed me the teacher's "*Purim*" present in a sealed envelope. When I was going off, he thrust into my hand a second envelope and said to me, in a quick whisper: "And this you will give to Esther." "To Esther?"

Esther

“To Esther.” Any one else in my place would have asked twice as much for this. But I am not that sort.

“Father of the Universe,” thought I, when I was going off with the “*Purim*” present, “what can my brother have written to the teacher’s daughter? I must have a peep—only just a peep. I will not take a bite out of it. I will only look at it.”

And I opened Esther’s letter and read a whole “Book of Esther.” I will repeat what was there, word for word.

“FROM MORDECAI TO ESTHER,

“And there was a man, a young man in Shushan—our village. His name was Mordecai and he loved a maiden called Esther. And the maiden was beautiful, charming. And the maiden found favour in his eyes. The maiden told this to no one because Mottel had asked her not to. Every day Mottel passes her house to catch a glimpse of Esther. And when the time comes for Esther to get married, Mottel will go with her under the wedding canopy.”

What do you say to my brother—how he translated the “Book of Esther”? I should like to hear what the teacher will say to such a translation. But how comes the cat over the water? Hush! There’s a way, as I am a Jew! I will change the letters, give the teacher’s poem to Esther, and Esther’s letter to the teacher. Let him rejoice.

Jewish Children

Afterwards, if there's a fine to do, will I be to blame? Don't all people make mistakes sometimes? Does it not happen that even the postmaster of our village himself forgets to give up letters? No such thing will ever happen to me. I am not that sort.

“Good ‘Yom-tov,’ teacher,” I cried the moment I rushed into “*Cheder*,” in such an excited voice that he jumped. “My brother Mottel has sent you a ‘*Purim*’ present, and he wishes you to live to next year.”

And I gave the teacher Esther's letter. He opened it, read it, thought a while, looked at it again, turned it about on all sides, as if in search of something. “Search, search,” I said to myself, “and you will find something.”

The teacher put on his silver spectacles, read the letter, and did not even make a grimace. He only sighed—no more. Later he said to me: “Wait. I will write a few lines.” And he took the pen and ink and started to write a few lines. Meanwhile, I turned around in the “*Cheder*.” The teacher's wife gave me a little cake. And when no one was looking, I put into Esther's hand the poem and the money intended for her father. She reddened, went into a corner, and opened the envelope slowly. Her face burnt like fire, and her eyes blazed dangerously. “She doesn't seem to be satisfied with the ‘*Purim*’ present,” I thought. I took from the teacher the few lines he had written.

“Good ‘Yom-tov’ to you, teacher,” I cried in

Esther

the same excited voice as when I had come in. "May you live to next year." And I was gone.

When I was on the other side of the door, Esther ran after me. Her eyes were red with weeping. "Here," she said angrily, "give this to your brother!"

On the way home I first opened the teacher's letter. He was more important. This is what was written in it.

"MY DEAR AND FAITHFUL PUPIL, MORDECAI N.

"I thank you many times for your '*Purim*' present that you have sent me. Last year and the year before, you sent me a real '*Purim*' present. But this year you sent me a new translation of the 'Book of Esther.' I thank you for it. But I must tell you, Mottel, that your rendering does not please me at all. Firstly, the city of Shushan cannot be called 'our village.' Then I should like to know where it says that Mordecai was a young man? And why do you call him Mottel? Which Mottel? And where does it say he loved a maiden? The word referring to Mordecai and Esther means 'brought up.' And your saying 'he will go with her under the wedding canopy' is just idiotic nonsense. The phrase you quote refers to Ahasuerus, not to Mordecai. Then again, it is nowhere mentioned in the 'Book of Esther' that Ahasuerus went with Esther under the wedding canopy. Does it need brains to turn a passage upside down? Every passage must have sense in it. Last year,

Jewish Children

and the year before, you sent me something different. This year you sent your teacher a translation of the 'Book of Esther,' and a distorted translation into the bargain. Well, perhaps it should be so. Anyhow, I am sending you back your translation, and may the Lord send you a good year, according to the wishes of your teacher."

Well, that's what you call a slap in the face. It serves my brother right. I should think he will never write such a "Book of Esther" again.

Having got through the teacher's letter, I must see what the teacher's daughter writes. On opening the envelope, the two paper "*roubles*" fell out. What the devil does this mean? I read the letter—only a few lines.

"Mottel, I thank you for the two '*roubles*.' You may take them back. I never expected such a '*Purim*' present from you. I want no presents from you, and certainly no charity."

Ha! ha! What do you say to that? She does not want charity. A nice story, as I am a Jewish child! Well, what's to be done next? Any one else in my place would surely have torn up the two letters and put the money in his pocket. But I am not that sort. I did a better thing than that. You will hear what. I argued with myself after this fashion: When all is said and done, I got paid by my brother Mottel for the journey. Then what do I want him for now? I went and gave the two letters to my father. I wanted to hear what he would say to them. He would understand the

Esther

translation better than the teacher, though he is a father, and the teacher is a teacher.

What happened? After my father had read the two letters and the translation, he took hold of my brother Mottel and demanded an explanation of him. Do not ask me any more.

You want to know the end—what happened to Esther, the teacher's daughter, and to my brother Mottel? What could have happened? Esther got married to a widower. Oh, how she cried. I was at the wedding. Why she cried so much I do not know. It seemed that her heart told her she would not live long with her husband. And so it was. She lived with him only one-half year, and died. I do not know what she died of. I do not know. No one knows. Her father and mother do not know either. It was said she took poison—just went and poisoned herself. "But it's a lie. Enemies have invented that lie," said her mother, the teacher's wife. I heard her myself.

And my brother Mottel? Oh, he married before Esther was even betrothed. He went to live with his father-in-law. But he soon returned, and alone. What had happened? He wanted to divorce his wife. Said my father to him: "You are a man of clay." My mother would not have this. They quarrelled. It was lively. But it was useless. He divorced his wife and married another woman. He now has two children—a boy and a girl. The boy is called Herzl, after Dr. Herzl, and the girl is called Esther. My father

Jewish Children

wanted her to be named Gittel, and my mother was dying for her to be called Leah, after her mother. There arose a quarrel between my father and mother. They quarrelled a whole day and a whole night. They decided the child should be named Leah-Gittel, after their two mothers. Afterwards my father decided he would not have Leah-Gittel. "What is the sense of it? Why should her mother's name go first?" My brother Mottel came in from the synagogue and said he had named the child Esther. Said my father to him: "Man of clay, where did you get the name Esther from?" Mottel replied: "Have you forgotten it will soon be 'Purim'?" Well, what have you to say now? It's all over. My father never calls Mottel "man of clay" since then. But both of them—my mother and my father—exchanged glances and were silent.

What the silence and the exchange of glances meant I do not know. Perhaps you can tell me?

The Pocket-Knife

Listen, children, and I will tell you a story about a little knife—not an invented story, but a true one, that happened to myself.

I never wished for anything in the world so much as for a pocket-knife. It should be my own, and should lie in my pocket, and I should be able to take it out whenever I wished, to cut whatever I liked. Let my friends know. I had just begun to go to school, under Yossel Dardaki, and I already had a knife, that is, what was almost a knife. I made it myself. I tore a goose-quill out of a feather brush, cut off one end, and flattened out the other. I pretended it was a knife and would cut.

“What sort of a feather is that? What the devil does it mean? Why do you carry a feather about with you?” asked my father—a sickly Jew, with a yellow, wrinkled face. He had a fit of coughing. “Here are feathers for you—playtoys! Tkeh-heh-heh-heh!”

“What do you care if the child plays?” asked my mother of him. She was a short-built woman and wore a silk scarf on her head. “Let my enemies eat out their hearts!”

Later, when I was learning the Bible and the commentaries, I very nearly had a real knife, also of

Jewish Children

my own making. I found a bit of steel belonging to my mother's crinoline, and I set it very cleverly into a piece of wood. I sharpened the steel beautifully on a stone, and naturally cut all my fingers to pieces.

"See, just see, how he has bled himself, that son of yours," said my father. He took hold of my hands in such a way that the very bones cracked. "He's a fine fellow! Heh-heh-heh!"

"Oh, may the thunder strike me!" cried my mother. She took the little knife from me, and threw it into the fire. She took no notice of my crying. "Now it will come to an end. Woe is me!"

I soon got another knife, but in reality, a little knife. It had a thick, round, wooden handle, like a barrel, and a curved blade which opened as well as closed. You want to know how I came by it? I saved up the money from what I got for my breakfasts, and I bought the knife for seven "*grosschens*" from Solomon, and I owed him three more "*grosschens*."

Oh, how I loved it, how I loved it. I came home from school black and blue, hungry and sleepy, and with my ears well boxed. (You see, I had just started learning the "*Gemarra*" with Mottel, the "Angel of Death." "If an ox gore a cow" I learnt. And if an ox goes a cow, then I must get beaten.) And the first thing I did was to take out my pocket-knife from under the black cupboard. (It lay there the whole day, because I dared not take it to school with me; and at home no one must know that I

The Pocket-Knife

have a knife.) I stroked it, I cut a piece of paper with it, split a straw in halves, and then cut up my bread into little cubes which I stuck on the tip of the blade, and afterwards put into my mouth.

Later, before going to bed, I cleaned the knife, and scrubbed it, and polished it. I took the sharpening stone, which I found in the hayloft, spit on it, and in silence began to work, sharpening the little knife, sharpening, sharpening.

My father, his little round cap on his head, sat over a book. He coughed and read, read and coughed. My mother was in the kitchen making bread. I did not cease from sharpening my knife, and sharpening it.

Suddenly my father woke up, as from a deep sleep.

“Who is making that hissing noise? Who is working? What are you doing, you young scamp?”

He stood beside me, and bent over my sharpening-stone. He caught hold of my ear. A fit of coughing choked him.

“Ah! Ah! Ah! Little knives! Heh-heh-heh!” said my father, and he took the knife and the sharpening-stone from me. “Such a scamp! Why the devil can’t he take a book into his hand? Tkeh-heh-heh!”

I began to cry. My father improved the situation by a few slaps. My mother ran in from the kitchen, her sleeves turned up, and she began to shout:

“Shah! Shah! What’s the matter here?

Jewish Children

Why do you beat him? God be with you! What have you against the child? Woe is me!"

"Little knives," said my father, ending up with a cough. "A tiny child. Such a devil. Tkeh-heh-heh! Why the devil can't he take a book into his hand? He's already a youth of eight years. . . . I will give you pocket-knives—you good-for-nothing, you. [In the middle of everything, pocket-knives. Thek-heh-heh!"]

But what had he against my little knife? How had it sinned in his eyes? Why was he so angry?

I remember that my father was nearly always ailing—always pale and hollow-cheeked, and always angry with the whole world. For the least thing he flared up and would tear me to pieces. It was fortunate my mother defended me. She took me out of his hands.

And that pocket-knife of mine was thrown away somewhere. For eight days on end I looked and looked for it, but could not find it. I mourned deeply for that curved knife—the good knife. How dark and embittered was my soul at school when I remembered that I would come home with a swollen face, with red, torn ears from the hands of Mottel, the "Angel of Death," because an ox gored a cow, and I would have no one to turn to for comfort. I was lonely without the curved knife—lonely as an orphan. No one saw the tears I shed in silence, in my bed, at night, after I had come back from "*Cheder*." In silence, I cried my eyes out. In the morning I was again at "*Cheder*," and again I repeated: "If an ox gore a cow," and

The Pocket-Knife

again I felt the blows of Mottel, the "Angel of Death"; again my father was angry, coughed, and swore at me. I had not a free moment. I did not see a smiling face. There was not a single little smile for me anywhere, not a single one. I had nobody. I was alone—all alone in the whole world.

A year went by, and perhaps a year and a half. I was beginning to forget the curved knife. It seems I was destined to waste all the years of my childhood because of pocket-knives. A new knife was created—to my misfortune—a brand new knife, a beauty, a splendid one. As I live, it was a fine knife. It had two blades, fine, steel ones, sharp as razors, and a white bone handle, and brass ends, and copper rivets. I tell you, it was a beauty, a real good pocket-knife.

How came to me such a fine knife, that was never meant for such as I? That is a whole story—a sad, but interesting story. Listen to me attentively.

What value in my eyes had the German Jew who lodged with us—the contractor, Herr Hertz Hertzzenhertz, when he spoke Yiddish, went about without a cap, had no beard or earlocks, and had his coat-tails cut off? I ask you how I could have helped laughing into his face, when that Jewish-Gentile, or Gentilish-Jew talked to me in Yiddish, but in a curious Yiddish with a lot of A's in it.

"Well, dear boy, which portion of the Law will be read this week?"

"Ha! ha! ha!" I burst out laughing and hid my face in my hands.

Jewish Children

"Say, say, my dear child, what portion of the Law will be read this week?"

"Ha! ha! ha! Balak," I burst out with a laugh, and ran away.

But that was only in the beginning, before I knew him. Afterwards, when I knew Herr Hertz Hertzenhertz better (he lived at our house for over a year) I loved him so well that I did not care if he said no prayers, and ate his food without saying the blessings. Nevertheless, I did not understand how he existed, and why the Lord allowed him to remain in the world. Why was he not choked at table? And why did the hair not fall out of his uncovered head? I had heard from my teacher, Mottel, the "Angel of Death," from his own mouth, that this German Jew was only a spirit. That is to say, a Jew was turned into a German; and later on he might turn into a wolf, a cow, a horse, or maybe a duck. A duck?

"Ha! ha! ha! A fine story," thought I. But I was genuinely sorry for the German. Nevertheless, I did not understand why my father, who was a very orthodox Jew, should pay the German Jew so much respect, as also did the other Jews who used to come into our house.

"Peace be unto you, Reb Hertzenhertz! Blessed art thou who comest, Reb Hertz Hertzenhertz!"

I once ventured to ask my father why this was so, but he thrust me to one side and said:

"Go away. It is not your business. Why do you get under our feet? Who the devil wants you?"

The Pocket-Knife

Why the devil can't you take a book into your hands?
Heh-heh-heh-heh!"

Again a book? Lord of the world, I also want to see; I also want to hear what people are saying.

I went into the parlour, hid myself in a corner, and heard everything the men talked about. Herr Hertz Hertzenhertz laughed aloud, and smoked thick black cigars that had a very strong smell. Suddenly my father came over to me, and gave me a smack.

"Are you here again, you idler and good-for-nothing? What will become of you, you dunce? What will become of you? Heh-heh-heh-heh!"

It was no use. My father drove me out. I took a book into my hands, but I did not want to read it. What was I to do? I went about the house, from one room to the other, until I came to the nicest room of all—the room in which slept Herr Hertz Hertzenhertz. Ah, how beautiful and bright it was! The lamps were lit, and the mirror shone. On the table was a big, beautiful silver inkstand, and beautiful pens, also little ornaments—men, and animals, and flowers, and bones and stones, and a little knife! Ah, what a beautiful knife! What if I had such a knife? What fine things I would make with it. How happy I should be. Well, I must try it. Is it sharp? Ah, it cuts a hair. It slices up a hair. Oh, oh, oh, what a knife!

One moment I held the knife in my hand. I looked about me on all sides, and slipped it into my pocket. My hands trembled. My heart was

Jewish Children

beating so loudly that I could hear it saying, "Tick, tick, tick!" I heard some one coming. It was he—Herr Hertz Hertzenhertz. Ah, what was I to do? The knife might remain in my pocket. I could put it back later on. Meanwhile, I must get out of the room, run away, away, far.

I could eat no supper that night. My mother felt my head. My father threw angry glances at me, and told me to go to bed. Sleep? Could I close my eyes? I was like dead. What was I to do with the little knife? How was I going to put it back again?

“Come over here, my little ornament,” said my father to me next day. “Did you see the little pocket-knife anywhere?”

Of course I was very much frightened. It seemed to me that he knew—that everybody knew. I was almost, almost crying out: “The pocket-knife? Here it is.” But something came into my throat, and would not let me utter a sound for a minute or so. In a shaking voice I replied:

“Where? What pocket-knife?”

“Where? What knife?” my father mocked at me. “What knife? The golden knife. Our guest’s knife, you good-for-nothing, you! You dunce, you! Tkeh-heh-heh!”

“What do you want of the child?” put in my mother. “The child knows nothing of anything, and he worries him about the knife, the knife.”

“The knife—the knife! How can he not know about it?” cried my father angrily. “All the

The Pocket-Knife

morning he hears me shouting—The knife! The knife! The knife! The house is turned upside down for the knife, and he asks 'Where? What knife?' Go away. Go and wash yourself, you good-for-nothing, you. You dunce, dunce! Tkeh-heh-heh!"

I thank Thee, Lord of the Universe, that they did not search me. But what was I to do next? The knife had to be hidden somewhere, in a safe place. Where was I to hide it? Ah! In the attic. I took the knife quickly from my pocket, and stuck it into my top-boot. I ate, and I did not know what I was eating. I was choking.

"Why are you in such a hurry? What the devil . . . ?" asked my father.

"I am hurrying off to school," I answered, and grew red as fire.

"A scholar, all of a sudden. What do you say to such a saint?" he muttered, and glared at me. I barely managed to finish my breakfast, and say grace.

"Well, why are you not off to '*Cheder*,' my saint?" asked my father.

"Why do you hunt him so?" asked my mother. "Let the child sit a minute."

I was in the attic. Deep, deep in a hole lay the beautiful knife. It lay there in silence.

"What are you doing in the attic?" called out my father. "You good-for-nothing! You street-boy! Tkeh-heh-heh-heh!"

"I am looking for something," I answered. I nearly fell down with fright.

Jewish Children

“Something? What is the something? What sort of a thing is that something?”

“A—a bo—ok. An—an old ‘Ge—gemar—ra.’”

“What? A ‘Gemarra’? In the attic? Ah, you scamp you! Come down at once. Come down. You’ll get it from me. You street-boy! You dog-beater! You rascal! Tkeh-heh-heh-heh!”

I was not so much afraid of my father’s anger as that the pocket-knife might be found. Who could tell? Perhaps some one would go up to the attic to hang out clothes to dry, or to paint the rafters? The knife must be taken down from there, and hidden in a better place. I went about in fear and trembling. Every glance at my father told me that he knew, and that now, now he was going to talk to me of the guest’s knife. I had a place for it—a grand place. I would bury it in the ground, in a hole near the wall. I would put some straw on the spot to mark it. The moment I came from “*Cheder*” I ran out into the yard. I took the knife carefully from my pocket, but had no time to look at it, when my father called out:

“Where are you at all? Why don’t you go and say your prayers? You swine-herd you! You are a water-carrier! Tkeh-heh-heh!”

But whatever my father said to me, and as much as the teacher beat me, it was all rubbish to me when I came home, and had the pleasure of seeing my one and only dear friend—my little knife.

The Pocket-Knife

The pleasure was, alas! mixed with pain, and embittered by fear—by great fear.

It is the summer time. The sun is setting. The air grows somewhat cooler. The grass emits a sweet odour. The frogs croak, and the thick clouds fly by, without rain, across the moon. They wish to swallow her up. The silvery white moon hides herself every minute, and shows herself again. It seemed to me that she was flying and flying, but was still on the same spot. My father sat down on the grass, in a long mantle. He had one hand in the bosom of his coat, and with the other he smoothed down the grass. He looked up at the star-spangled sky, and coughed and coughed. His face was like death, silvery white. He was sitting on the exact spot where the little knife was hidden. He knew nothing of what was in the earth under him. Ah, if he only knew! What, for instance, would he say, and what would happen to me?

“Aha!” thought I within myself, “you threw away my knife with the curved blade, and now I have a nicer and a better one. You are sitting on it, and you know nothing. Oh, father, father!”

“Why do you stare at me like a tom-cat?” asked my father. “Why do you sit with folded arms like a self-satisfied old man? Can you not find something to do? Have you said the night prayer? May the devil not take you, scamp! May an evil end not come upon you! Tkeh-heh-heh!”

When he says may the devil *not* take you, and

Jewish Children

may an evil end *not* come upon you, then he is not angry. On the contrary, it is a sign that he is in a good humour. And, surely, how could one help being in a good humour on such a wonderfully beautiful night, when every one is drawn out of doors into the street, under the soft, fresh, brilliant sky? Every one is now out of doors—my father, my mother, and the younger children who are looking for little stones and playing in the sand. Herr Hertz Hertzenhertz was going about in the yard, without a hat, smoking a cigar, and singing a German song. He looked at me, and laughed. Probably he was laughing because my father was driving me away. But I laughed at them all. Soon they would be going to bed, and I would go out into the yard (I slept in the open, before the door, because of the great heat), and I would rejoice in, and play with my knife.

The house is asleep. It is silent around and about. Cautiously I get up; I am on all fours, like a cat; and I steal out into the yard. The night is silent. The air is fresh and pure. Slowly I creep over to the spot where the little knife lies buried. I take it out carefully, and look at it by the light of the moon. It shines and glitters, like guineagold, like a diamond. I lift up my eyes, and I see that the moon is looking straight down on my knife. Why is she looking at it so? I turn round. She looks after me. Maybe she knows whose knife it is, and where I got it? Got it? Stole it!

For the first time since the knife came into my hands has this terrible word entered my thoughts.

The Pocket-Knife

Stolen? Then I am, in short, a thief, a common thief? In the Holy Law, in the Ten Commandments, are written, in big letters: "THOU SHALT NOT STEAL."

Thou shalt not steal. And I have stolen. What will they do to me in hell for that? Woe is me! They will cut off my hand—the hand that stole. They will whip me with iron rods. They will roast and burn me in a hot oven. I will glow for ever and ever. The knife must be given back. The knife must be put back in its place. One must not hold a stolen knife. Tomorrow I will put it back.

That was what I decided. And I put the knife into my bosom. I imagined it was burning, scorching me. No, it must be hidden again, buried in the earth till tomorrow. The moon still looked down on me. What was she looking at? The moon saw. She was a witness.

I crept back to the house, to my sleeping-place. I lay down again, but could not sleep. I tossed about from side to side, but could not fall asleep. It was already day when I dozed off. I dreamt of a moon, I dreamt of iron rods, and I dreamt of little knives. I got up very early, said my prayers with pleasure, with delight, ate my breakfast while standing on one foot, and marched off to "*Cheder*."

"Why are you in such a hurry for '*Cheder*'?" cried my father to me. "What is driving you? You will not lose your knowledge if you go a little later. You will have time enough for mischief. You scamp! You epicurean! You heathen! Tkeh-heh-heh-heh!"

Jewish Children

“Why so late? Just look at this.” The teacher stopped me, and pointed with his finger at my comrade, Berrel the red one, who was standing in the corner with his head down.

“Do you see, bandit? You must know that from this day his name is not Berrel the red one, as he was called. He is now called a fine name. His name is now Berrel the thief. Shout it out, children. Berrel the thief! Berrel the thief!”

The teacher drew out the words, and put a little tune into them. The pupils repeated them after him, like a chorus.

“Berrel the thief—Berrel the thief!”

I was petrified. A cold wave passed over my body. I did not know what it all meant.

“Why are you silent, you heathen, you?” cried the teacher, and gave me an unexpected smack in the face. “Why are you silent, you heathen? Don’t you hear the others singing? Join in with them, and help them. Berrel the thief—Berrel the thief!”

My limbs trembled. My teeth rattled. But, I helped the others to shout aloud “Berrel the thief! Berrel the thief!”

“Louder, heathen,” prompted the teacher. “In a stronger voice—stronger.”

And I, along with the rest of the choir, sang out in a variety of voices, “Berrel the thief—Berrel the thief!”

“Sh—sh—sh—a—a—ah!” cried the teacher, banging the table with his open hand. “Hush!

The Pocket-Knife

Now we will betake ourselves to pronouncing judgment." He spoke in a sing-song voice.

"Ah, well, Berrel thief, come over here, my child. Quicker, a little quicker. Tell me, my boy, what your name is." This also was said in a sing-song.

"Berrel."

"What else?"

"Berrel—Berrel the thief."

"That's right, my dear child. Now you are a good boy. May your strength increase, and may you grow stronger in every limb!" (Still in the same sing-song.) "Take off your clothes. That's right. But can't you do it quicker? I beg of you, be quick about it. That's right, little Berrel, my child."

Berrel stood before us as naked as when he was born. Not a drop of blood showed in his body. He did not move a limb. His eyes were lowered. He was as dead as a corpse.

The teacher called out one of the older scholars, still speaking in the same sing-song voice:

"Well, now, Hirschalle, come out from behind the table, over here to me. Quicker. Just so. And now tell us the story from beginning to end—how our Berrel became a thief. Listen, boys, pay attention."

And Hirschalle began to tell the story. Berrel had got the little collecting box of "Reb" Mayer the "Wonder-worker," into which his mother threw a "kopek," sometimes two, every Friday, before lighting the Sabbath candles. Berrel had fixed his eyes on that box, on which there hung a little lock.

Jewish Children

By means of a straw gummed at the end, he had managed to extract the "kopeks" from the box, one by one. His mother, Slatte, the hoarse one, suspecting something wrong, opened the box, and found in it one of the straws tipped with gum. She beat her son Berrel. And after the whipping she had prevailed on the teacher to give him, he confessed that for a whole year—a round year, he had been extracting the "kopeks," one by one, and that, every Sunday, he had bought himself two little cakes, some locust beans, and—and so forth, and so forth.

"Now, boys, pronounce judgment on him. You know how to do it. This is not the first time. Let each give his verdict, and say what must be done to a boy who steals 'kopeks' from a charity-box, by means of a straw."

The teacher put his head to one side. He closed his eyes, and turned his right ear to Hirschalle. Hirschalle answered at the top of his voice:

"A thief who steals 'kopeks' from a charity-box should be flogged until the blood spurts from him."

"Moshalle, what is to be done to a thief who steals 'kopeks' from a charity-box?"

"A thief," replied Moshalle, in a wailing voice, "a thief who steals 'kopeko' from a charity-box should be stretched out. Two boys should be put on his head, two on his feet, and two should flog him with pickled rods."

"Topalle Tutteratu, what is to be done to a thief who steals 'kopeks' from a charity-box?"

Kopalle Kuckaraku, a boy who could not pro-

The Pocket-Knife

nounce the letters K and G, wiped his face, and gave his verdict in a squeaking voice.

“A boy who steals ‘topets’ from the charity-bots should be punished like this. Every boy should do over to him, and shout into his face, three times, thief, thief, thief.”

The whole school laughed. The master put his thumb on his wind-pipe, like a cantor, and called out to me, as if I were a bridegroom being called up, at the synagogue, to read the portion of the Law for the week:

“Tell me, now, my dear little boy, what would you say should be done to a thief who steals ‘kopeks’ from a charity-box.”

I tried to reply, but my tongue would not obey me. I shivered as with ague. Something was in my throat, choking me. A cold sweat broke out all over my body. There was a whistling in my ears. I saw before me, not the teacher, nor the naked Berrel the thief, nor my comrades. I saw before me only knives—pocket-knives without an end, white, open knives that had many blades. And there, beside the door, hung the moon. She looked at me, and smiled, like a human being. My head was going round. The whole room—the table and the books, the boys and the moon that hung beside the door, and the little knives—all were whirling round. I felt as if my two feet were chopped off. Another moment, and I might have fallen down, but I controlled myself with all my strength, and I did not fall.

In the evening, I came home, and felt that my

Jewish Children

face was burning. My cheeks were on fire, and in my ears was a hissing noise. I heard some one speaking to me, but what they said I do not know. My father was saying something, and seemed to be angry. He wanted to beat me. My mother intervened. She spread out her apron, as a clucking hen spreads out her wing to defend her chickens from injury. I heard nothing, and did not want to hear. I only wanted the darkness to fall sooner, so that I might make an end of the little knife. What was I to do with it? Confess everything, and give it up? Then I would suffer the same punishment as Berrel. Throw it carelessly somewhere? But I may be caught? Throw it away, and no more, so long as I am rid of it? Where was I to throw it in order that it might not be found by anybody? On the roof? The noise would be heard. In the garden? It might be found. Ah, I know! I have a plan, I'll throw it into the water. A good plan, as I live. I'll throw it into the well that is in our own yard. This plan pleased me so much that I did not wish to dwell on it longer. I took up the knife, and ran off straight to the well. It seemed to me that I was carrying in my hand not a knife but something repulsive—a filthy little creature of which I must rid myself at once. But, still I was sorry. It was such a fine little knife. For a moment, I stood thinking, and it seemed to me that I was holding in my hand a living thing. My heart ached for it. Surely, surely, it has cost me so much heartache. It is a pity for the living. I summoned all my courage, and let it out suddenly

The Pocket-Knife

from my fingers. Plash! The water bubbled up for a moment. Nothing more was heard, and my knife was gone. I stood a moment at the well and listened. I heard nothing. Thank God, I was rid of it. My heart was faint, and full of longing. Surely, it was a fine knife—such a knife!

I went back to bed, and saw that the moon was still looking down at me. And it seemed to me she had seen everything I had done. From the distance a voice seemed to be saying to me: "But, you are a thief all the same. Catch him, beat him. He is a thief, a thief."

I stole back into the house, and into my own bed. I dreamt that I ran, swept through the air. I flew with my little knife in my hand. And the moon looked at me and said:

"Catch him, beat him. He is a thief—a thief."

A long, long sleep, and a heavy, a very heavy dream. A fire burnt within me. My head was buzzing. Everything I saw was red as blood. Burning rods of fire cut into my flesh. I was swimming in blood. Around me wriggled snakes and serpents. They had their mouths open, ready to swallow me. Right into my ears some one was blowing a trumpet. And, some one was standing over me, and shouting, keeping time with the trumpet: "Whip him, whip him, whip him. He is a thie—ef." And I myself shouted: "Oh, oh, take the moon away from me. Give her up the little

Jewish Children

knife. What have you against poor Berrel? He is not guilty. It is I who am a thief—a thief."

Beyond that, I remember nothing.

I opened one eye, then the other. Where was I? On a bed, I think. Ah, is that you, mother, mother? She does not hear me. Mother, mother, mo—o—other! What is this? I imagine I am shouting aloud. Shah! I listen. She is weeping silently. I also see my father, with his yellow, sickly face. He is sitting near me, an open book in his hand. He reads, and sighs, and coughs and groans. It seems that I am dead already. Dead? . . . All at once, I feel that it is growing brighter before my eyes. Everything is growing lighter, too. My head and my limbs are lighter. There is a ringing in my ear, and in my other ear. Tschinna! I sneezed. Akhstchu!

"Good health! May your days be lengthened! May your years be prolonged! It is a good sign. Blessed art Thou, O Lord!"

"Sneezed in reality? Blessed be the Most High!"

"Let us call at once Mintze the butcher's wife. She knows how to avert the evil eye."

"The doctor ought to be called—the doctor."

"The doctor? What for? That is nonsense. The Most High is the best doctor. Blessed be the Lord, and praised be His Name!"

"Go asunder, people. Separate a bit. It is terribly hot. In the name of God, go away."

The Pocket-Knife

"Ah, yes. I told you that you have to cover him with wax. Well, who is right?"

"Praise be the Lord, and blessed be His Holy Name! Ah, God! God! Blessed be the Lord! and praised be His Holy Name!"

They fluttered about me. They looked at me. Each one came and felt my head. They prayed over me, and buzzed around me. They licked my forehead, and spat out, by way of a charm. They poured hot soup down my throat, and filled my mouth with spoonfuls of preserves. Every one flew around me. They cared for me as if I were the apple of their eye. They fed me with broths and tiny chickens, as if I were an infant. They did not leave me alone. My mother sat by me always, and told me over and over again the whole story of how they had lifted me up from the ground, almost dead, and how I had been lying for two weeks on end, burning like a fire, croaking like a frog, and muttering something about whippings and little knives. They already imagined I was dead, when suddenly I sneezed seven times. I had practically come to life again.

"Now we see what a great God we have, blessed be He, and praised be His Name!" That was how my mother ended up, the tears springing to her eyes. "Now we can see that when we call to Him He listens to our sinful requests and our guilty tears. We shed a lot, a lot of tears, your father and I, until the Lord had pity on us. . . . We nearly, nearly lost our child through our sinfulness. May we suffer in your stead! And through what?

Jewish Children

Through a boy who was a thief, a certain Berrel whom the teacher flogged at 'Cheder,' almost until he bled. When you came home from 'Cheder' you were more dead than alive. May your mother suffer instead of you! The teacher is a tyrant, a murderer. The Lord will punish him for it—the Lord of the Universe. No, my child, if the Lord lets us live, when you get well, we will send you to another teacher, not to such a tyrant as is the 'Angel of Death,'—may his name be blotted out for ever!"

These words made a terrible impression on me. I threw my arms around my mother, and kissed her.

"Dear, dear mother."

And my father came over to me softly. He put his cold, white hand on my forehead, and said to me kindly, without a trace of anger:

"Oh, how you frightened us, you heathen you! Tkeh-heh-heh-heh!"

Also the Jewish German, or the German Jew, Herr Hertz Hertzenhertz, his cigar between his teeth, bent down and touched my cheek, with his clean-shaven chin. He said to me in German:

"Good! Good! Be well—be well!"

A few weeks after I got out of bed, my father said to me:

"Well, my son, now go to 'Cheder,' and never think of little knives again, or other such nonsense. It is time you began to be a bit of a man. If it please God, you will be 'Bar-Mitzvah' in three years —may you live to a hundred and twenty. Tkeh-heh-heh!"

The Pocket-Knife

With such sweet words did my father send me off to "*Cheder*," to my new teacher, "*Reb*" Chayim Kotter. It was the first time that I had heard such good kind words from my father. And I forgot, in a moment, all his harshness, and all his abuse, and all his blows. It was as if they had never existed in the world. If I were not ashamed, I would have thrown my arms about his neck, and kissed him. But how can one kiss a father? Ha! ha! ha!

My mother gave me a whole apple and three "*groschens*" to take to "*Cheder*," and the German gave me a few "*kopeks*." He pinched my cheek, and said in his language:

"Best boy, good, good!"

I took my "*Gemarra*" under my arm, kissed the "*Mezuzah*," and went off to "*Cheder*" like one newly born, with a clean heart, and fresh, pious thoughts. The sun looked down, and greeted me with its warm rays. The little breeze stole in under one of my earlocks. The birds twittered—Tif—tif—tif—tif! I was lifted up. I was borne on the breeze. I wanted to run, jump, dance. Oh, how good it is—how sweet to be alive and to be honest, when one is not a thief and not a liar.

I pressed my "*Gemarra*" tightly to my breast, and still tighter. I ran to "*Cheder*" with pleasure, with joy. And I swore by my "*Gemarra*" that I would never, never touch what belonged to another—never, never steal, and never, never deny anything again. I would always be honest, for ever and ever honest.

On the Fiddle

Children, I will now play for you a little tune on the fiddle. I imagine there is nothing better and finer in the world than to be able to play on the fiddle. What? Perhaps it is not so? I don't know how it is with you. But I know that since I first reached the age of understanding, my heart longed for a fiddle. I loved as my life any musician whatever—no matter what instrument he played. If there was a wedding anywhere in the town, I was the first to run forward and welcome the musicians. I loved to steal over to the bass, and draw my fingers across one of the strings—Boom! And I flew away. Boom! And I flew away. For this same "boom" I once got it hot from Berel Bass. Berel Bass—a cross Jew with a flattened out nose, and a sharp glance—pretended not to see me stealing over to the bass. And when I stretched out my hand to the thick string, he caught hold of me by the ear and dragged me, respectfully, to the door: "Here, scamp, kiss the '*Mezuzah*.' "

But this was not of much consequence to me. It did not make me go a single step from the musicians. I loved them all, from Sheika the little fiddler with his beautiful black beard and his thin white hands, to Getza the drummer with his beautiful hump, and,

On the Fiddle

if you will forgive me for mentioning it, the big bald patches behind his ears. Not once, but many times did I lie hidden under a bench, listening to the musicians playing, though I was frequently found and sent home. And from there, from under the bench, I could see how Sheika's thin little fingers danced about over the strings; and I listened to the sweet sounds which he drew so cleverly out of the little fiddle.

Afterwards I used to go about in a state of great inward excitement for many days on end. And Sheika and his little fiddle stood before my eyes always. At night I saw him in my dreams; and in the daytime I saw him in reality; and he never left my imagination. When no one was looking I used to imagine that I was Sheika, the little fiddler. I used to curve my left arm and move my fingers, and draw out my right hand, as if I were drawing the bow across the strings. At the same time I threw my head to one side, closing my eyes a little—just as Sheika did, not a hair different.

My "*Rebbe*," Nota-Leib, once caught me doing this. It happened in the middle of a lesson. I was moving my arms about, throwing my head to one side, and blinking my eyes, and he gave me a sound box on the ears.

"What a scamp can do! We are teaching him his lessons, and he makes faces and catches flies!"

I promised myself that, even if the world turned upside down, I must have a little fiddle, let it cost

Jewish Children

me what it would. But what was I to make a fiddle out of? Of cedar wood, of course. But it's easy to talk of cedar wood. How was I to come by it when, as everybody knows, the cedar tree grows only in Palestine? But what does the Lord do for me? He goes and puts a certain thought in my head. In our house there was an old sofa. This sofa was left us, as a legacy, by our grandfather "Reb" Anshel. And my two uncles fought over this sofa with my father—peace be unto him! My uncle Benny argued that since he was my grandfather's oldest son, the sofa belonged to him; and my uncle Sender argued that he was the youngest son, and that the sofa belonged to him. And my father—peace be unto him!—argued that although he was no more than a son-in-law to my grandfather, and had no personal claim on the sofa, still, since his wife, my mother, that is, was the only daughter of "Reb" Anshel, the sofa belonged, by right, to her. But all this happened long ago. And as the sofa has remained in our house, this was a proof that it was our sofa. And our two aunts interfered, my aunt Etka, and my aunt Zlatka. They began to invent scandals and to carry tales from one house to another. It was sofa and sofa, and nothing else but sofa! The town rocked, all because of the sofa. However, to make a long story short, the sofa remained our sofa.

This same sofa was an ordinary wooden sofa covered with a thin veneer. This veneer had come unloosened in many places and was split up. It had now a number of small mounds. And the upper

On the Fiddle

layer of the veneer which had come unloosened was of the real cedar wood—the wood of which fiddles are made. At least, that is what I was told at school. The sofa had one fault, and this fault was, in reality, a good quality. For instance, when one sat on it one could not get up off it again because it stood a little on the slant. One side was higher than the other, and in the middle there was a hole. And the good thing about our sofa was that no one wanted to sit on it, and it was put away in a corner, to one side, in compulsory retirement.

It was on this sofa that I had cast my eyes, to make a fiddle out of the cedar wood veneer. A bow I had already provided myself with, long ago. I had a comrade, Shimalle Yudel, the car-owner's son. He promised me a few hairs from the tail of his father's horse. And resin to smear the bow with I had myself. I hated to depend on miracles. I got the resin from another friend of mine, Mayer-Lippa, Sarah's son, for a bit of steel from my mother's old crinoline which had been knocking about in the attic. Out of this piece of steel, Mayer Lippa afterwards made himself a little knife. It is true when I saw the knife I wanted him to change back again with me. But he would not have it. He began to shout:

“A clever fellow that! What do you say to him! I worked hard for three whole nights. I sharpened and sharpened and cut all my fingers sharpening, and now he comes and wants me to change back again with him!”

Jewish Children

"Just look at him!" I cried. "Well then, it won't be! A great bargain for you—a little bit of steel! Isn't there enough steel knocking about in our attic? There will be enough for our children, and our children's children even."

Anyway, I had everything that was necessary. And there only remained one thing for me to do—to scale off the cedar wood from the sofa. For this work I selected a very good time, when my mother was in the shop, and my father had gone to lie down and have a nap after dinner. I hid myself in a corner and, with a big nail, I betook myself to my work in good earnest. My father heard, in his sleep, how some one was scraping something. At first he thought there were mice in the house, and he began to make a noise from his bedroom to drive them off—"Kush! Kush!" I was like dead. . . . My father turned over on the other side and when I heard him snoring again, I went back to my work. Suddenly I looked about me. My father was standing and staring at me with curious eyes. It appeared that he could not, on any account, understand what was going on—what I was doing. Then, when he saw the spoiled and torn sofa, he realized what I had done. He pulled me out of the corner by the ear and beat me so much that I fainted away and had to be revived. I actually had to have cold water thrown over me to bring me to life again.

"The Lord be with you! What have you done to the child?" my mother wailed, the tears starting to her eyes.

On the Fiddle

“Your beautiful son! He will drive me into my grave, while I am still living,” said my father, who was white as chalk. He put his hand to his heart and was attacked by a fit of coughing which lasted several minutes.

“Why should you eat your heart out like this?” my mother asked him. “As it is you are a sickly man. Just look at the face you’ve got. May my enemies have as healthy a year!”

My desire to play the fiddle grew with me. The older I grew, the stronger became my desire. And, as if out of spite, I was destined to hear music every day of the week. Right in the middle of the road, halfway between my home and the school, stood a little house covered with earth. And from that house came forth various sweet sounds. But most often than all the playing of a fiddle could be heard. In that house there lived a musician whose name was Naphtali “*Bezborodka*,”—a Jew who wore a short jacket, curled-up earlocks, and a starched collar. He had a fine-sized nose. It looked as if it had been stuck on his face. He had thick lips and black teeth. His face was pock-pitted, and had not on it even signs of a beard. That is why he was called “*Bezborodka*,” the Beardless One. He had a wife who was like a machine. The people called her “Mother Eve.” Of children he had about a dozen and a half. They were ragged, half-naked, and bare-footed. And each child, from the biggest to the smallest, played on a musical instrument. One played the fiddle,

Jewish Children

another the 'cello, another the double-bass, another the trumpet, another the "*Ballalaika*," another the drum, and another the cymbals. And amongst them there were some who could whistle the longest melody with their lips, or between their teeth. Others could play tunes on little glasses, or little pots, or bits of wood. And some made music with their faces. They were demons, evil spirits—nothing else.

I made the acquaintance of this family quite by accident. One day, as I was standing outside the window of their house, listening to them playing, one of the children, Pinna the flautist, a youth of about fifteen, in bare feet, caught sight of me through the window. He came out to me and asked me if I liked his playing.

"I only wish," said I, "that I may play as well as you in ten years' time."

"Can't you manage it?" he asked of me. And he told me that for two and a half '*roubles*' a month, his father would teach me how to play. But if I liked he himself, the son, that is, would teach me.

"Which instrument would you like to learn to play?" he asked. "On the fiddle?"

"On the fiddle."

"On the fiddle?" he repeated. "Can you pay two and a half '*roubles*' a month? Or are you as unfortunate as I am?"

"So far as that goes, I can manage it," I said. "But what then? Neither my father nor my mother, nor my teacher must know that I am learning to play the fiddle."

On the Fiddle

"The Lord keep us from telling it!" he cried. "Whose business is it to drum the news through the town? Maybe you have on you a cigar end, or a cigarette? No? You don't smoke? Then lend me a '*kopek*' and I will buy cigarettes for myself. But you must tell no one, because my father must not know that I smoke. And if my mother finds that I have money, she will take it from me and buy rolls for supper. Come into the house. What are we standing here for?"

With great fear, with a palpitating heart and trembling limbs, I crossed the threshold of the house that was to me a little Garden of Eden.

My friend Pinna introduced me to his father.

"Shalom—Nahum Veviks—a rich man's boy. He wants to learn to play the fiddle."

Naphtali "*Bezborodka*" twirled his earlocks, straightened his collar, buttoned up his coat, and started a long conversation with me, all about music and musical instruments in general and the fiddle in particular. He gave me to understand that the fiddle was the best and most beautiful of all instruments. There was none older and none more wonderful in the world than the fiddle. To prove this to me, he went on to tell me that the fiddle was always the leading instrument of any orchestra, and not the trumpet or the flute. And this was simply because the fiddle was the mother of all musical instruments.

And so it came about that Naphtali "*Bezborodka*" gave me a whole lecture on music. Whilst he was

Jewish Children

speaking he gesticulated with his hands and moved his nose, and I stood staring right into his mouth. I looked at his black teeth and swallowed, yes, positively swallowed, every word that he said.

“The fiddle, you must understand,” went on Naphtali “*Bezborodka*” to me, and evidently satisfied with the lecture he was giving me, “the fiddle, you must understand, is an instrument that is older than all other instruments. The first man in the world to play on the fiddle was Jubal-Cain, or Methuselah, I don’t exactly remember which. You will know that better than I, for, to be sure, you are learning Bible history at school. The second fiddler in the world was King David. Another great fiddler—the third greatest in the world—was Paganini. He also was a Jew. All the best fiddlers in the world were Jews. For instance there was ‘*Stempenyu*,’ and there was ‘*Pedotchur*.’ Of myself I say nothing. People tell me that I do not play the fiddle badly. But how can I come up to Paganini? They say that Paganini sold his soul to the Ashmodai for a fiddle. Paganini hated to play before great people like kings and popes, although they covered him with gold. He would much rather play at wayside inns for poor folks, or in villages. Or else he would play in the forest for wild beasts and fowls of the air. What a fiddler Paganini was! . . .

“Eh, boys, to your places! To your instruments!”

That was the order which Naphtali “*Bezborodka*” gave to his regiment of children, all of whom

On the Fiddle

came together in one minute. Each one took up an instrument. Naphtali himself stood up, beat his baton on the table, threw a sharp glance on every separate child and on all at once; and they began to play a concert on every sort of instrument with so much force that I was almost knocked off my feet. Each child tried to make more noise than the other. But above all, I was nearly deafened by the noise that one boy made, a little fellow who was called Hemalle. He was a dry little boy with a wet little nose, and dirty bare little feet. Hemalle played a curiously made instrument. It was a sort of sack which, when you blew it up, let out a mad screech—a peculiar sound like a yell of a cat after you have trodden on its tail. Hemalle beat time with his little bare foot. And all the while he kept looking at me out of his roguish little eyes, and winking to me as if he would say: “Well, isn’t it so? I blow well—don’t I?” But it was Naphtali himself who worked the hardest of all. Along with playing the fiddle, he led the orchestra, waved his hands about, shifted his feet, and moved his nose, and his eyes and his whole body. And if some one made a mistake—God forbid! he ground his teeth and shouted in anger:

“Forte, devil, forte! Fortissimo! Time, wretch, time! One, two, three! One, two, three!”

Having arranged with Naphtali “Bezborodka” that he should give me three lessons a week, of an hour and a half each day, for two “roubles” a month, I again and yet again begged of him that he

Jewish Children

would keep my visits a secret of secrets; for if he did not, I would be lost forever. He promised me faithfully that not even a bird would hear of my coming and going.

“We are the sort of people,” he said to me, proudly, fixing his collar in place, “we are the sort of people who never have any money. But you will find more honour and justice in our house than in the house of the richest man. Maybe you have a few ‘*groschens*’ about you?”

I took out a “*rouble*” and gave it to him. Naphtali took it in the manner of a professor, with his two fingers. He called over “Mother Eve,” turned away his eyes, and said to her:

“Here! Buy something to eat.”

“Mother Eve” took the “*rouble*” from him, but with both hands and all her fingers, examined it on all sides, and asked her husband:

“What shall I buy?”

“What you like,” he answered, pretending not to care. “Buy a few rolls, two or three salt herring, and some dried sausage. And don’t forget an onion, vinegar and oil. Well, and a glass of brandy, say—”

When all these things were brought home and placed upon the table, the family fell upon them with as much appetite as if they had just ended a long fast. I was actually tempted by an evil spirit; and when they asked me to take my place at the table I could not refuse. I do not remember when I enjoyed a meal as much as I enjoyed the one at the musician’s house that day.

On the Fiddle

After they had eaten everything, Naphtali winked to the children that they should take their instruments in their hands. And he treated me, all over again to a piece—"his own composition." This "composition" was played with so much excitement and force that my ears were deafened and my brain was stupefied. I left the house intoxicated by Naphtali "*Bezborodka's*" "composition." The whole day at school, the teacher and the boys and the books were whirling round and round in front of my eyes. And my ears were ringing with the echoes of Naphtali's "composition." At night I dreamt that I saw Paganini riding on the Ashmodai, and that he banged me over the head with his fiddle. I awoke with a scream, and a headache, and I began to pour out words as from a sack. What I said I do not know. But my older sister, Pessel, told me afterwards that I talked in heat, and that there was no connection between any two words I uttered. I repeated some fantastic names—"Composition." "Paganini," etc. . . . And there was another thing my sister told me. During the time I was lying delirious, several messages were sent from Naphtali the Musician to know how I was. There came some barefoot boy who made many inquiries about me. He was driven off, and was told never to dare to come near the house again. . . .

"What was the musician's boy doing here?" asked my sister. And she tormented me with questions. She wanted me to tell her. But I kept repeating the same words:

Jewish Children

"I do not know. As I live, I do not know. How am I to know?"

"What does it look like?" asked my mother.
"You are already a young man, a grown-up man—may no evil eye harm you! They will be soon looking for a bride for you, and you go about with fine friends, barefoot young musicians. What business have you with musicians? What was Naphtali the Musician's boy doing here?"

"What Naphtali?" I asked, pretending not to understand. "What musician?"

"Just look at him—the saint!" put in my father.
"He knows nothing about anything. Poor thing!
His soul is innocent before the Lord! When I
was your age I was already long betrothed. And
he is still playing with strange boys. Dress your-
self, and go off to school. And if you meet Hershel
the Tax-collector, and he asks you what was the
matter with you, you are to tell him that you had
theague. Do you hear what I am saying to you?
Theague!"

I could not for the life of me understand what business Hershel the Tax-collector had with me. And for what reason was I to tell him I had been suffering from the ague? . . . It was only a few weeks later that this riddle was solved for me.

Hershel the Tax-collector was so called because he, and his grandfather before him, had collected the taxes of the town. It was the privilege of their family. He was a young man with a round little belly, and a red little beard, and moist little eyes.

On the Fiddle

and he had a broad white forehead, a sure sign that he was a man of brains. And he had the reputation in our town of being a fine, young man, a modern, and a scholar. He had a sound knowledge of the Bible, and was a writer of distinction. That is to say, he had a beautiful hand. They say that his manuscripts were carried around and shown in the whole world. And along with these qualities, he had money, and he had one little daughter—an only child, a girl with red hair and moist eyes. She and her father, Hershel the Tax-collector, were as like as two drops of water. Her name was Esther, but she was called by the nickname of "Plesteril." She was nervous and genteel. She was as frightened of us, schoolboys, as of the Angel of Death, because we used to torment her. We used to tease her and sing little songs about her:

"Estheril.

"Plesteril!

"Why have you no little sister?"

Well, after all, what is there in these words? Nothing, of course. Nevertheless, whenever "Plesteril" heard them, she used to cover up her ears, run home crying, and hide herself away in the farthest of far corners. And, for several days, she was afraid to go out in the street.

But that was once on a time, when she was still a child. Now she is a young woman, and is counted amongst the grown-ups. Her hair was tied up in a red plait, and she was dressed like a bride, in the latest fashions. My mother had a high opinion of her. She could never praise her enough, and called

Jewish Children

her "a quiet dove." Sometimes, on the Sabbath Esther came into our house, to see my sister Pessel. And when she saw me, she grew redder than ever, and dropped her eyes. At the same time, my sister Pessel would call me over to ask me something, and also to look into my eyes as she looked into Esther's.

And it came to pass that, on a certain day, there came into my school my father and Hershel the Tax-collector. And after them came Shalom-Shachno the Matchmaker—a Jew who had six fingers, and a curly black beard, and who was terribly poor. Seeing such visitors, our teacher, "*Reb*" Zorach, pulled on his long coat, and put his hat on his head. And because of his great excitement, one of his earlocks got twisted up behind his ear. His hat got creased; and more than half of his little round cap was left sticking out at the back of his head, from under his hat; and one of his cheeks began to blaze. One could see that something extraordinary was going to happen.

Of late, "*Reb*" Shalom-Shachno the Matchmaker had started coming into the school a little too often. He always called the teacher outside, where they stood talking together for some minutes, whispering and getting excited. The matchmaker gesticulated with his hands, and shrugged his shoulders. He always finished up with a sigh, and said:

"Well, it's the same story again. If it is destined it will probably take place. How can we know anything—how?"

When the visitors came in, our teacher, "*Reb*" Zorach, did not know what to do, or where he was

On the Fiddle

to seat them. He took hold of the kitchen stool on which his wife salted the meat, and first of all spun round and round with it several times, and went up and down the whole length of the room. After this, he barely managed to place the stool on the floor when he sat down on it himself. But he at once jumped up again, greatly confused; and he caught hold of the back pocket of his long coat, just as if he had lost a purse of money.

"Here is a stool. Sit down," he said to his visitors.

"It's all right! Sit down, sit down," said my father to him. "We have come in to you, '*Reb*' Zorach, only for a minute. This gentleman wants to examine my son—to see what he knows of the Bible."

And my father pointed to Hershel the Tax-collector.

"Oh, by all means! Why not?" answered the teacher, "*Reb*" Zorach. He took up a little Bible, and handed it to Hershel the Tax-collector. The expression on his face was as if he were saying: "Here it is for you, and do what you like."

Hershel the Tax-collector took the Bible in his hand like a man who knows thoroughly what he is doing. He twisted his little head to one side, closed one eye, turned and turned the pages, and gave me to read the first chapter of the "Song of Songs."

"Is it the 'Song of Songs'?" asked my teacher, with a faint smile, as if he would say: "Could you find nothing more difficult?"

Jewish Children

"The 'Song of Songs,'" replied Hershel the Tax-collector. "The 'Song of Songs' is not as easy as you imagine. One must understand the 'Song of Songs.'" (Hershel could not pronounce the letter R but said H.)

"Certainly," put in Shalom-Shachno, with a little laugh.

The teacher gave me a wink. I went over to the table, shook myself to and fro for a minute, and began to chant the "Song of Songs" to a beautiful melody, first introducing this commentary on it:—

"The 'Song of Songs'—a song above all songs! All other songs have been sung by prophets, but this 'Song' has been sung by a prophet who was the son of a prophet. All other songs have been sung by men of wisdom, but this 'Song' has been sung by a man of wisdom who was the son of a man of wisdom. All other songs have been sung by kings, but this 'Song' has been sung by a king who was the son of a king."

Whilst I was singing, I glanced quickly at my audience. And on each face I could see a different expression. On my father's face I could see pride and pleasure. On my teacher's face were fear and anxiety, lest, God forbid! I should make a mistake, or commit errors in reading. His lips, in silence, repeated every word after me. Hershel the Tax-collector sat with his head a little to one side, the ends of his yellow beard in his mouth, one little eye closed, the other staring up at the ceiling. He was listening with the air of a great, great judge.

On the Fiddle

“*Reb*” Shalom-Shachno the Matchmaker never took his eyes off Hershel for a single minute. He sat with half his body leaning forward, shaking himself to and fro, as I did. And he could not restrain himself from interrupting me many times by an exclamation, a little laugh and a cough, all in one breath, as he waved his double-jointed finger in the air.

“When people say that he knows—then he knows!”

A few days after this, plates were broken, and in a fortunate hour, I was betrothed to Hershel the Tax-collector’s only daughter, Plesteril.

It sometimes happens that a man grows in one day more than anybody else grows in ten years. When I was betrothed, I, all at once, began to feel that I was a “grown-up.” Surely I was the same as before, and yet I was not the same. From my smallest comrade to my teacher “*Reb*” Zorach, everybody now began to look upon me with more respect. After all, I was a bridegroom-elect, and had a watch. And my father also gave up shouting at me. Of smacks there is no need to say anything. How could any one take hold of a bridegroom-elect who had a gold watch, and smack his face for him? It would be a disgrace before the whole world, and a shame for one’s own self. It is true that it once happened that a bridegroom-elect named Eli was flogged at our school, because he had been caught sliding on the ice with the Gentile boys of the town. But for that again, the whole town made a fine

Jewish Children

business of the flogging afterwards. When the scandal reached the ears of Eli's betrothed, she cried so much until the marriage contract was sent back to the bridegroom-elect, to Eli, that is. And through grief and shame, he would have thrown himself into the river, but that the water was frozen. . . .

Nearly as bad a misfortune happened to me. But it was not because I got a flogging, and not because I went sliding on the ice. It was because of a fiddle.

And here is the story for you:—

At our wineshop we had a frequent visitor, Tchitchick, the bandmaster, whom we used to call "Mr. Sergeant." He was a tall, powerful man with a big round beard and terrifying eyebrows. And he talked a curiously mixed-up jargon composed of several languages. When he talked, he moved his eyebrows up and down. When he lowered his eyebrows, his face was black as night. When he raised them up, his face was bright as day. And this was because, under these same thick eyebrows he had a pair of kindly, smiling light blue eyes. He wore a uniform with gilt buttons, and that is why he was called at our place "Mr. Sergeant." He was a very frequent visitor at our wine-shop. Not because he was a drunkard. God forbid! But for the simple reason that my father was very clever at making from raisins "the best and finest Hungarian wine." Tchitchick used to love this wine. He never ceased from praising it. He used to put his

On the Fiddle

big, terrifying hand on my father's shoulder, and say to him:

"Mr. Cellarer, you have the best Hungarian wine. There isn't such wine in Buda Pesth, by God!"

With me Tchitchick was always on the most intimate terms. He praised me for learning such a lot at school. He often examined me to see if I knew who Adam was. And who was Isaac? And who was Joseph?

"Yousef?" I asked him, in Yiddish. "Do you mean Yousef the Saint?"

"Joseph," he repeated.

"Yousef," I corrected him, once again.

"With us it's Joseph. With you it's Youdsef," he said to me, and pinched my cheek. "Joseph, Youdsef, Youdsef, Dsodsepf—what does it matter? It is all the same."

"Ha! ha! ha!"

I buried my face in my hands, and laughed heartily.

But from the day I became a bridegroom-elect, Tchitchick gave up playing with me as if I were a clown; and he began to talk to me as if I were his equal. He told me stories of the regiment and of musicians. "Mr. Sergeant" had a tremendous lot of talk in him. But no one else excepting myself had the time to listen to him. On one occasion he began to talk to me of playing. And I asked him:

"On which instrument does 'Mr. Sergeant' play?"

"On all instruments," he answered, and raised his eyebrows at me.

Jewish Children

"On the fiddle also?" I asked him. And all at once he took on, in my imagination, the face of an angel.

"Come over to me some day," he said, "and I will play for you."

"When can I come to you, 'Mr. Sergeant,' if not on the Sabbath day?" I asked. "But I can only come on condition that no one knows anything about it. Can you promise me that?"

"As I serve God!" he exclaimed, and lifted his eyebrows at me.

• • •

Tchitchick lived far out of the town, in a little white house that had tiny windows and painted shutters. Leading up to it there was a big green garden from out of which peeped, proudly, a number of tall yellow sunflowers, as if they were something important. They bent their heads a little to one side, and shook themselves to and fro. It seemed to me, they were calling out to me: "Come over here to us, boy! There is grass here! There is freedom here! There is light here. It is fresh here! It is warm here! It is pleasant here!" . . . And after the stench and heat and dust of the town, and after the overcrowding, and the noise and the tumult of the school, one was indeed glad to get here. Because there is grass here; it is fresh here; it is bright here; it is warm here; it is pleasant here. One longs to run, leap, shout and sing. Or else one suddenly wants to throw oneself on the bare earth, to bury one's face in the green, sweet-smelling grass. But, alas! this is not for you, Jewish children!

On the Fiddle

Yellow sunflowers, green leaves, fresh air, pure earth, or a clear sky. Do not be offended, Jewish children, but all these have not grown up out of your rubbish! . . .

I was met by a big, shaggy-haired dog with red, fiery eyes. He fell upon me with so much fierceness that the soul almost dropped out of my body. It was fortunate that he was tied up with a rope. On hearing my screams, Tchitchick flew out, without his jacket, and began ordering the dog to be silent. And he was silent. Afterwards, Tchitchick took hold of my hand, led me straight to the black dog, and told me not to be afraid. He would not harm me. "Just try and pat him on the back," said Tchitchick to me. And without waiting, he took hold of my hand and drew it all over the dog's skin, at the same time calling him many curious names, and speaking kind words to him. The black villain lowered his head, wagged his tail, and licked himself with his tongue. He threw at me a glance of contempt, as if he would say: "It is lucky for you that my master is standing beside you, otherwise you would have gone from here without a hand."

I got over my terror of the dog. I entered the house with "Mr. Sergeant," and I was struck dumb with astonishment. All the walls were covered with guns from top to bottom. And on the floor lay a skin with the head of a lion or a leopard. It had terribly sharp teeth. But the lion was only half an evil. After all, it was dead. But the guns—the guns! . . . I did not even care about the fresh

Jewish Children

plums and the apples which the master of the house offered me out of his own garden. My eyes did not cease leaping from one wall to the other. . . . But later on, when Tchitchick took a little fiddle out of a red drawer—a beautiful, round little fiddle, with a curious little belly, let his big spreading beard droop over it, and held it with his big strong hands, and drew the bow across the strings a few times, backwards and forwards, I forgot, in the blinking of an eye, the black dog and the terrible lion, and the loaded guns. I only saw before me Tchitchick's spreading beard and his black, lowered eyebrows. I only saw a round little fiddle with a curious little belly, and fingers which danced over the strings so rapidly that no human brain could answer the questions which arose to my mind: "Where does one get so many fingers?"

Presently, Tchitchick and his spreading beard, vanished, along with his thick eyebrows and his wonderful fingers. And I saw nothing at all before me. I only heard a singing, a groaning, a weeping, a sobbing, a talking, and a growling. They were extraordinary, peculiar sounds that I heard, the like of which I had never heard before, in all my life. Sounds sweet as honey, and smooth as oil were pouring themselves right into my heart, without ceasing. And my soul went off somewhere far from the little house, into another world, into a Garden of Eden which was nothing else but beautiful sounds—which was one mass of singing, from beginning to end. . . .

On the Fiddle

"Do you want some tea?" asked Tchitchick of me, putting down the little fiddle, and slapping me on the shoulder.

I felt as if I had fallen down from the seventh heaven on to the earth.

From that day I visited Tchitchick regularly every Sabbath afternoon, to hear him playing the fiddle. I went straight to the house. I was afraid of no one; and I even became such good friends with the black dog that, when he saw me, he wagged his tail, and wanted to fall upon me to lick my hands. I would not let him do this. "Let us rather be good friends from the distance."

At home, not even a bird knew where I spent the Sabbath afternoons. I was a bridegroom-elect, after all. And no one would have known of my visits to Tchitchick to this day, if a new misfortune had not befallen me—a great misfortune, of which I will now tell you.

Surely it is no one's affair if a Jewish young man goes for a walk on the Sabbath afternoon a little beyond the town? Have people really got nothing better to do than to think of others and look after them to see where they are going? But of what use are such questions as these? It lies in our nature, in the Jewish nature, I mean, to look well after every one else, to criticize others and advise them. For example, a Jew will go over to his neighbour, at prayers, and straighten out the "Frontispiece" of his phylacteries. Or he will

Jewish Children

stop his neighbour, who is running with the greatest haste and excitement, to tell him that the leg of his trouser is turned up. Or he will point his finger at his neighbour, so that the other shall not know what is amiss with him, whether it is his nose, or his beard, or what the deuce is wrong with him. Or a Jew will take a thing out of his neighbour's hand, when the other is struggling to open it, and will say to him: "You don't know how. Let me." Or should he see his neighbour building a house, he will come over to look for a fault in it. He says he believes the ceiling is too high, the rooms are too small, or the windows are awkwardly large. And there seems nothing else left the builder to do but scatter the house to pieces, and start it all over again. . . . We Jews have been distinguished by this habit of interfering from time immemorial—from the very first day on which the world was created. And you and I between us will never alter the world full of Jews. It is not our duty to even attempt it. . . .

After this long introduction, it will be easy for you to understand how Ephraim Log-of-wood—a Jew who was a black stranger to me, and who did not care a button for any of us—should poke his nose into my affairs. He sniffed and smelled my tracks, and found out where I went on Sabbath afternoons, and got me into trouble. He swore that he himself saw me eating forbidden food at the house of "Mr. Sergeant," and that I was smoking a cigarette on the Sabbath. "May I see myself enjoying all that is good!" he cried. "If it is

On the Fiddle

not as I say, may I never get to the place where I am going," he said. "And if I am uttering the least word of falsehood, may my mouth be twisted to one side, and may my two eyes drop out of my head," he added.

"Amen! May it be so," I cried.

And I caught from my father another smack in the face. I must not be insolent, he told me. . . .

But I imagine I am rushing along too quickly with my story. I am giving you the soup before the fish. I was forgetting entirely to tell you who Ephraim Log-of-wood was, and what he was, and how the incident happened.

At the end of the town, on the other side of the bridge, there lived a Jew named Ephraim Log-of-wood. Why was he called Log-of-wood? Because he had once dealt in timber. And today he is not dealing in timber because something happened to him. He said it was libel, a false accusation. People found at his place a strange log of wood with a strange name branded on it. And he had a fine lot of trouble after that. He had a case, and he had appeals, and he had to send petitions. He just managed to escape from being put into prison. From that time, he threw away all trading, and betook himself to looking after public matters. He pushed himself into all institutions, the tax-collecting, and the work done at the House of Learning. Generally speaking, he was not so well off. He was often put to shame publicly. But as time went on, he insinuated himself into everybody's bones. He gave people to understand that "He

Jewish Children

knew where a door was opening." And in the course of time, Ephraim became a useful person, a person it was hard to do without. That is how a worm manages to crawl into an apple. He makes himself comfortable, makes a soft bed for himself, makes himself a home, and in time becomes the real master of the house.

In person, Ephraim was a tiny little man. He had short little legs, and small little hands, and red little cheeks, and a quick walk which was a sort of a little dance. And he tossed his little head about. His speech was rapid, and his voice squeaky. And he laughed with a curious little laugh which sounded like the rattling of dried peas. I could not bear to look at him, I don't know why. Every Sabbath afternoon, when I was going to Tchitchick's, I used to meet Ephraim on the bridge, walking along, in a black, patched cloak, the sleeves of which hung loosely over his shoulders. His hands were folded in front of him, and he was singing in his thin little voice. And the ends of his long cloak kept dangling at his heels.

"A good Sabbath," I said to him.

"A good Sabbath," he replied. "And where is a boy going?"

"Just for a walk," I said.

"For a walk? All alone?" he asked. And he looked straight into my eyes with such a little smile that it was hard to guess what he meant by it—whether he thought that it was very brave of me to be walking all alone or not. Was it, in his opinion, a wise thing to do, or a foolish?

On the Fiddle

On one occasion, when I was going to Tchitchick's house, I noticed that Ephraim Log-of-wood was looking at me very curiously. I stopped on the bridge and gazed into the water. Ephraim also stopped on the bridge, and he also gazed into the water. I started to go back. He followed me. I turned round again, to go forward, and he also turned round in the same direction. A few minutes later, he was lost to me. When I was sitting at Tchitchick's table, drinking tea, we heard the black dog barking loudly at some one, and tearing at his rope. We looked out of the window, and I imagined I saw a low-sized, black figure with short little legs, running, running. Then it disappeared from view. From his manner of running, I could have sworn the little creature was Ephraim Log-of-wood.

And thus it came to pass—

I came home late that Sabbath evening. It was already after the "*Havdalah*." My face was burning. And I found Ephraim Log-of-wood sitting at the table. He was talking very rapidly, and was laughing with his curious little laugh. When he saw me, he was silent. He started drumming on the table with his short little fingers. Opposite him sat my father. His face was death-like. He was pulling at his beard, tearing out the hairs one by one. This was a sure sign that he was in a temper.

"Where have you come from?" my father asked of me and looked at Ephraim.

Jewish Children

"Where am I to come from?" said I.

"How do I know where you are to come from?" said he. "You tell me where you have come from. You know better than I."

"From the House of Learning," said I.

"And where were you the whole day?" said he.

"Where could I be?" said I.

"How do I know?" said he. "You tell me. You know better than I."

"At the House of Learning," said I.

"What were you doing at the House of Learning?" said he.

"What should I be doing at the House of Learning?" said I.

"Do I know what you could be doing there?" said he.

"I was learning," said I.

"What were you learning?" said he.

"What should I learn?" said I.

"Do I know what you should learn?" said he.

"I was learning 'Gemarra,'" said I.

"What 'Gemarra' were you learning?" said he.

"What 'Gemarra' should I learn?" said I.

"Do I know what 'Gemarra' you should learn?" said he.

"I learnt the 'Gemarra,' 'Shabos,'" said I.

At this Ephraim Log-of-wood burst out laughing in his rattling little laugh. And it seemed that my father could bear no more. He jumped up from his seat and delivered me two resounding fiery boxes on the ears. Stars flew before my eyes.

On the Fiddle

My mother heard my shouts from the other room. She flew into us with a scream.

"Nahum! The Lord be with you! What are you doing? A young man—a bridegroom-elect! Just before his wedding! Bethink yourself! If her father gets to know of this—God forbid!"

My mother was right. The girl's father got to know the whole story. Ephraim Log-of-wood went off himself and told it to him. And in this way Ephraim had his revenge of Hershel the Tax-collector; for the two had always been at the point of sticking knives into one another.

Next day I got back the marriage-contract and the presents which had been given to the bride-elect. And I was no longer a bridegroom-elect.

This grieved my father so deeply that he fell into a very serious illness. He was bedridden for a long time. He would not let me come near him. He refused to look into my face. All my mother's tears and arguments and explanations and her defence of me were of no use at all.

"The disgrace," said my father, "the disgrace of it is worse than anything else."

"May it turn out to be a real, true sacrifice for us all," said my mother to him. "The Lord will have to send us another bride-elect. What can we do? Shall we take our own lives? Perhaps it is not his destiny to marry this girl."

Jewish Children

Amongst those who came to visit my father in his illness was Tchitchick the bandmaster.

When my father saw him, he took off his little round cap, sat up in his bed, stretched out his hand to him, looked straight into his eyes and said:

“Oh, ‘Mr. Sergeant!’ ‘Mr. Sergeant!’ ”

He could not utter another sound, because he was smothered by his tears and his cough. . . .

This was the first time in my life that I saw my father crying. His tears gripped hold of my heart, and chilled me to the very soul.

I stood and looked out of the window, swallowing my tears in silence. At that moment, I was heartily sorry for all the mischief I had done. I cried within myself, from the very depths of my heart, beating my breast: “I have sinned.” And within myself, I vowed solemnly to myself that I would never, never anger my father again, and never, never cause him any pain.

No more fiddle!

This Night

“TO MY DEAR SON,

“I send you—‘roubles,’ and beg of you, my dear son, to do me the favour, and come home for the Passover Festival. It is a disgrace to me in my old age. We have one son, an only child, and we are not worthy to see him. Your mother also asks me to beg of you to be sure to come home for the Passover. And you must know that Busie is to be congratulated. She is now betrothed. And if the Lord wills it, she is going to be married on the Sabbath after the Feast of Weeks.

“From me,
“YOUR FATHER.”

This is the letter my father wrote to me. For the first time a sharp letter—for the first time in all those years since we had parted. And we had parted from one another, father and I, in silence, without quarrelling. I had acted in opposition to his wishes. I would not go his road, but my own road. I went abroad to study. At first my father was angry. He said he would never forgive me. Later, he began to send me money.

“I send you—‘roubles,’ ” he used to write, “and your mother sends you her heartiest greetings.”

Short, dry letters he wrote me. And my replies to him were also short and dry:

“I have received your letter with the—‘roubles.’

Jewish Children

I thank you, and I send my mother my heartiest greetings."

Cold, terribly cold were our letters to one another. Who had time to realize where I found myself in the world of dreams in which I lived? But now my father's letter woke me up. Not so much his complaint that it was a shame I should have left him alone in his old age—that it was a disgrace for him that his only son should be away from him. I will confess it that this did not move me so much. Neither did my mother's pleadings with me that I should have pity on her and come home for the Passover Festival. Nothing took such a strong hold of me as the last few lines of my father's letter. "And you must know that Busie is to be congratulated."

Busie! The same Busie who has no equal anywhere on earth, excepting in the "Song of Songs"—the same Busie who is bound up with my life, whose childhood is interwoven closely with my childhood—the same Busie who always was to me the bewitched Queen's Daughter of all my wonderful fairy tales—the most wonderful princess of my golden dreams—this same Busie is now betrothed, is going to be married on the Sabbath after the Feast of Weeks? Is it true that she is going to be married, and not to me, but to some one else?

Who is Busie—what is she? Oh, do you not know who Busie is? Have you forgotten? Then I will tell you her biography all over again, briefly,

This Night

and in the very same words I used when telling it you once on a time, years ago.

I had an older brother, Benny. He was drowned. He left after him a water-mill, a young widow, two horses, and one child. The mill was neglected; the horses were sold; the young widow married again and went away somewhere, far; and the child was brought home to our house.

That child was Busie.

And Busie was beautiful as the lovely Shulamite of the "Song of Songs." Whenever I saw Busie I thought of the Shulamite of the "Song of Songs." And whenever I read the "Song of Songs" Busie's image came up and stood before me.

Her name is the short for Esther-Liba: Libusa: Busie. She grew up together with me. She called my father "father," and my mother "mother." Everybody thought that we were sister and brother. And we grew up together as if we were sister and brother. And we loved one another as if we were sister and brother.

Like a sister and a brother we played together, and we hid in a corner—we two; and I used to tell her the fairy tales I learnt at school—the tales which were told me by my comrade Sheika, who knew everything, even "*Kaballa*." I told her that by means of "*Kaballa*," I could do wonderful tricks—draw wine from a stone, and gold from a wall. By means of "*Kaballa*," I told her, I could manage that we two should rise up into the clouds, and even higher than the clouds. Oh, how she loved to

Jewish Children

hear me tell my stories! There was only one story which Busie did not like me to tell—the story of the Queen's Daughter, the princess who had been bewitched, carried off from under the wedding canopy, and put into a palace of crystal for seven years. And I said that I was flying off to set her free. . . . Busie loved to hear every tale excepting that one about the bewitched Queen's Daughter whom I was flying off to set free.

"You need not fly so far. Take my advice, you need not."

This is what Busie said to me, fixing on my face her beautiful blue "Song of Songs" eyes.

That is who and what Busie is.

And now my father writes me that I must congratulate Busie. She is betrothed, and will be married on the Sabbath after the Feast of Weeks. She is some one's bride—some one else's, not mine!

I sat down and wrote a letter to my father, in answer to his.

"TO MY HONOURED AND DEAR FATHER,

"I have received your letter with the—'roubles.' In a few days, as soon as I am ready, I will go home, in time for the first days of the Passover Festival—or perhaps for the latter days. But I will surely come home. I send my heartiest greetings to my mother. And to Busie I send my congratulations. I wish her joy and happiness.

"From me,

"YOUR SON."

It was a lie. I had nothing to get ready; nor was there any need for me to wait a few days. The same day on which I received my father's letter

This Night

and answered it, I got on the train and flew home. I arrived home exactly on the day before the Festival, on a warm, bright Passover eve.

I found the village exactly as I had left it, once on a time, years ago. It was not changed by a single hair. Not a detail of it was different. It was the same village. The people were the same. The Passover eve was the same, with all its noise and hurry and flurry and bustle. And out of doors it was also the same Passover eve as when I had been at home, years ago.

There was only one thing missing—the “Song of Songs.” No; nothing of the “Song of Songs” existed any longer. It was not now as it had been, once on a time, years ago. Our yard was not any more King Solomon’s vineyard, of the “Song of Songs.” The wood and the logs and the boards that lay scattered around the house were no longer the cedars and the fir trees. The cat that was stretched out before the door, warming herself in the sun, was no more a young hart, or a roe, such as one comes upon in the “Song of Songs.” The hill on the other side of the synagogue was no more the Mountain of Lebanon. It was no more one of the Mountains of Spices. . . . The young women and girls who were standing out of doors, washing and scrubbing and making everything clean for the Passover—they were not any more the Daughters of Jerusalem of whom mention is made in the “Song of Songs.” . . . What has become of my “Song of Songs” world that was, at one time,

Jewish Children

so fresh and clear and bright—the world that was as fragrant as though filled with spices?

• • •

I found my home exactly as I had left it, years before. It was not altered by a hair. It was not different in the least detail. My father, too, was the same. Only his silvery-white beard had become a little more silvery. His broad white wrinkled forehead was now a little more wrinkled. This was probably because of his cares. . . . And my mother was the same as when I saw her last. Only her ruddy cheeks were now slightly sallow. And I imagined she had grown smaller, shorter and thinner. Perhaps I only imagined this because she was now slightly bent. And her eyes were slightly enflamed, and had little puffy bags under them, as if they were swollen. Was it from weeping, perhaps? . . .

For what reason had my mother been weeping? For whom? Was it for me, her only son who had acted in opposition to his father's wishes? Was it because I would not go the same road as my father, but took my own road, and went off to study, and did not come home for such a long time? . . . Or did my mother weep for Busie, because she was getting married on the Sabbath after the Feast of Weeks?

Ah, Busie! She was not changed by so much as a hair. She was not different in the least detail. She had only grown up—grown up and also grown more beautiful than she had been, more lovely. She had grown up exactly as she had promised to

This Night

grow, tall and slender, and ripe, and full of grace. Her eyes were the same blue "Song of Songs" eyes, but more thoughtful than in the olden times. They were more thoughtful and more dreamy, more care-worn and more beautiful "Song of Songs" eyes than ever. And the smile on her lips was friendly, loving homely and affectionate. She was quiet as a dove —quiet as a virgin.

When I looked at the Busie of today, I was reminded of the Busie of the past. I recalled to mind Busie in her new little holiday frock which my mother had made for her, at that time, for the Passover. I remembered the new little shoes which my father had bought for her, at that time, for the Passover. And when I remembered the Busie of the past, there came back to me, without an effort on my part, all over again, phrase by phrase, and chapter by chapter, the long-forgotten "Song of Songs."

"Thou hast doves' eyes within thy locks: thy hair is as a flock of goats, that appear from mount Gilead.

"Thy teeth are like a flock of sheep that are even shorn, which come up from the washing: whereof every one bear twins, and none is barren among them.

"Thy lips are like a thread of scarlet, and thy speech is comely: thy temples are like a piece of pomegranate within thy locks."

I look at Busie, and once again everything is as in the "Song of Songs," just as it was in the past, once on a time, years before.

Jewish Children

“Busie, am I to congratulate you?”

She does not hear me. But why does she lower her eyes? And why have her cheeks turned scarlet? No, I must bid her joy—I must!

“I congratulate you, Busie.”

“May you live in happiness,” she replies.

And that is all. I could ask her nothing. And to talk with her? There was nowhere where I might do that. My father would not let me talk with her. My mother hindered me. Our relatives prevented it. The rest of the family, the friends, neighbours and acquaintances who flocked into the house to welcome me, one coming and one going—they would not let me talk with Busie either. They all stood around me. They all examined me, as if I were a bear, or a curious creature from another world. Everybody wanted to see and hear me—to know how I was getting on, and what I was doing. They had not seen me for such a long time.

“Tell us something new. What have you seen? What have you heard?”

And I told them the news—all that I had seen and all that I had heard. At the same time I was looking at Busie. I was searching for her eyes. And I met her eyes—her big, deep careworn, thoughtful, beautiful blue “Song of Songs” eyes. But her eyes were dumb, and she herself was dumb. Her eyes told me nothing—nothing at all. And there arose to my memory the words I had learnt in the past, the “Song of Songs” sentence by sentence—

This Night

"A garden inclosed is my sister, my spouse: a spring shut up, a fountain sealed."

And a storm arose within my brain, and a fire began to burn within my heart. This terrible fire did not rage against anybody, only against myself—against myself and against my dreams of the past—the foolish, boyish, golden dreams for the sake of which I had left my father and my mother. Because of those dreams I had forgotten Busie. Because of them I had sacrificed a great, great part of my life; and because of them, and through them I had lost my happiness—lost it, lost it for ever!

Lost it for ever? No, it cannot be—it cannot be! Have I not come back—have I not returned in good time? . . . If only I could manage to talk with Busie, all alone with her! If only I could get to say a few words to her. But how could I speak with her, all alone, the few words I longed to speak, when everybody was present—when the people were all crowding around me? They were all examining me as if I were a bear, or a curious creature from another world. Everybody wanted to see and hear me—to know how I was getting on, and what I was doing. They had not seen me for such a long time!

More intently than any one else was my father listening to me. He had a Holy Book open in front of him, as always. His broad forehead was wrinkled up, as always. He was looking at me from over his silver spectacles, and was stroking the silver strands of his silvery-white beard, as always. And

Jewish Children

I imagined that he was looking at me with other eyes than he used to look. No, it was not the same look as always. He was reproaching me. I felt that my father was offended with me. I had acted contrary to his wishes. I had refused to go his road, and had taken a road of my own choosing. . . .

My mother, too, was standing close behind me. She came out of the kitchen. She left all her work, the preparations for the Passover, and she was listening to me with tears in her eyes. Though her face was still smiling, she wiped her eyes in secret with the corners of her apron. She was listening to me attentively. She was staring right into my mouth; and she was swallowing, yes, swallowing every word that I said.

And Busie also stood over against me. Her hands were folded on her bosom. And she was listening to me just as the others were. Along with them, she was staring right into my mouth. I looked at Busie. I tried to read what was in her eyes; but I could read nothing there, nothing at all, nothing at all.

"Tell more. Why have you grown silent?" my father asked me.

"Leave him alone. Did you ever see the like?" put in my mother hastily. "The child is tired. The child is hungry, and he goes on saying to him: 'Tell! Tell! Tell! And tell!'"

The people began to go away by degrees. And we found ourselves alone, my father and my mother, Busie and I. My mother went off to the kitchen.

This Night

In a few minutes she came back, carrying in her hand a beautiful Passover plate—a plate I knew well. It was surrounded by a design of big green fig leaves.

“Perhaps you would like something to eat, Shemak? It is a long time to wait until the ‘*Seder*.’”

That is what my mother said to me, and with so much affection, so much loyalty and so much passionate devotion. And Busie got up, and with silent footfalls, brought me a knife and fork—the well-known Passover knife and fork. Everything was familiar to me. Nothing was changed, nor different by a hair. It was the same plate with the big green fig leaves; the same knife and fork with the white bone handles. The same delicious odour of melted goose-fat came in to me from the kitchen; and the fresh Passover cake had the same Garden-of-Eden taste. Nothing was changed by a hair. Nothing was different in the least detail.

Only, in the olden times, we ate together on the Passover eve, Busie and I, off the same plate. I remember that we ate off the same beautiful Passover plate that was surrounded by a design of big green fig leaves. And, at that time, my mother gave us nuts. I remember how she filled our pockets with nuts. And, at that time, we took hold of one another’s hands, Busie and I. And I remember that we let ourselves go, in the open. We flew like eagles. I ran; she ran after me. I leaped over the logs of wood; she leaped after me. I was up; she was up. I was down; she was down.

Jewish Children

"Shemak! How long are we going to run, Shemak?"

So said Busie to me. And I answered her in the words of the "Song of Songs": "Until the day break, and the shadows flee away."

• • • • •
This was once on a time, years ago. Now Busie is grown up. She is big. And I also am grown up. I also am big. Busie is betrothed. She is betrothed to some one—to some one else, and not to me. . . . And I want to be alone with Busie. I want to speak a few words with her. I want to hear her voice. I want to say to her, in the words of the "Song of Songs": "Let me see thy countenance, let me hear thy voice."

And I imagine that her eyes are answering my unspoken words, also in the words of the "Song of Songs." "Come, my beloved, let us go forth into the fields; let us lodge in the villages.

"Let us get up early to the vineyards; let us see if the vine flourish, whether the tender grape appear, and the pomegranates bud forth: there will I give thee my loves."

I snatched a glimpse through the window to see what was going on out of doors. Ah, how lovely it was! How beautiful! How fragrant of the Passover! How like the "Song of Songs"! It was a sin to be indoors. Soon the day would be at an end. Lower and lower sank the sun, painting the sky the colour of guinea-gold. The gold was reflected in Busie's eyes. They were bathed in gold. Soon, soon, the day would be dead. And I would

This Night

have no time to say a single word to Busie. The whole day was spent in talking idly with my father and my mother, my relatives and friends, telling them of all that I had heard, and all that I had seen. I jumped up, and went over to the window. I looked out of it. As I was passing her, I said quickly to Busie:

“Perhaps we should go out for a while? It is so long since I was at home. I want to see everything. I want to have a look at the village.”

Can you tell me what was the matter with Busie? Her cheeks were at once enflamed. They burned with a great fire. She was as red as the sun that was going down in the west. She threw a glance at my father. I imagined she wanted to hear what my father would say. And my father looked at my mother, over his silver spectacles. He stroked the silver strands of his silvery-white beard, and said casually, to no one in particular:

“The sun is setting. It’s time to put on our Festival garments, and to go into the synagogue to pray. It is time to light the Festival candles. What do you say?”

No! It seemed that I was not going to get the chance of saying anything to Busie that day. We went off to change our garments. My mother had finished her work. She had put on her new silk Passover gown. Her white hands gleamed. No one has such beautiful white hands as my mother. Soon she will make the blessing over the Festival candles. She will cover her eyes with her snow-

Jewish Children

white hands and weep silently, as she used to do once on a time, years ago. The last lingering rays of the setting sun will play on her beautiful, transparent white hands. No one has such beautiful, white transparent hands as my mother.

But what is the matter with Busie? The light has gone out of her face just as it is going out of the sun that is slowly setting in the west, and as it is going out of the day that is slowly dying. But she is beautiful, and graceful as never before. And there is a deep sadness in her beautiful blue "Song of Songs" eyes. They are very thoughtful, are Busie's eyes.

What is Busie thinking of now? Of the loving guest for whom she had waited, and who had come flying home so unexpectedly, after a long, long absence from home? . . . Or is she thinking of her mother, who married again, and went off somewhere far, and who forgot that she had a daughter whose name was Busie? . . . Or is Busie now thinking of her betrothed, her affianced husband whom, probably, my father and mother were compelling her to marry against her own inclinations? . . . Or is she thinking of her marriage that is going to take place on the Sabbath after the Feast of Weeks, to a man she does not know, and does not understand? Who is he, and what is he? . . . Or, perhaps, on the contrary, I am mistaken? Perhaps she is counting the days from the Passover to the Feast of Weeks, until the Sabbath after the Feast of Weeks, because the man she is going to marry on that day

This Night

is her chosen, her dearest, her beloved? He will lead her under the wedding canopy. To him she will give all her heart, and all her love. And to me? Alas! Woe is me! To me she is no more than a sister. She always was to me a sister, and always will be. . . . And I imagine that she is looking at me with pity and with regret, and that she is saying to me, as she said to me, once on a time, years ago, in the words of the "Song of Songs:"

"O that thou wert as my brother."

"Why are you not my brother?"

What answer can I make her to these unspoken words? I know what I should like to say to her. Only let me get the chance to say a few words to her, no more than a few.

No! I shall not be able to speak a single word with Busie this day—nor even half a word. Now she is rising from her chair. She is going with light, soft footfalls to the cupboard. She is getting the candles ready for my mother, fixing them into the silver candlesticks. How well I know these silver candlesticks! They played a big part in my golden, boyish dreams of the bewitched Queen's Daughter whom I was going to rescue from the palace of crystal. The golden dreams, and the silver candlesticks, and the Sabbath candles, and my mother's beautiful, white transparent hands, and Busie's beautiful blue "Song of Songs" eyes, and the last rays of the sun that is going down in the west—are they not all one and the same, bound together and interwoven for ever? . . .

Jewish Children

"Ta!" exclaimed my father, looking out of the window, and winking to me that it was high time to change and go into the synagogue to pray.

And we changed our garments, my father and I, and we went into the synagogue to say our prayers.

Our synagogue, our old, old synagogue was not changed either, not by so much as a hair. Not a single detail was different. Only the walls had become a little blacker; the reader's desk was older; the curtain before the Holy Ark had drooped lower; and the Holy Ark itself had lost its polish, its newness.

Once on a time, our synagogue had appeared in my eyes like a small copy of King Solomon's Temple. Now the small temple was leaning slightly to one side. Ah, what has become of the brilliance, and the holy splendour of our little old synagogue? Where now are the angels which used to flutter about, under the carved wings of the Holy Ark on Friday evenings, when we were reciting the prayers in welcome of the Sabbath, and on Festival evenings when we were reciting the beautiful Festival prayers?

And the members of the congregation were also very little changed. They were only grown a little older. Black beards were now grey. Straight shoulders were stooped a little. The satin holiday coats that I knew so well were more threadbare, shabbier. White threads were to be seen in them and yellow stripes. Melech the Cantor sang as beautifully as in the olden times, years ago. Only

This Night

today his voice is a little husky, and a new tone is to be heard in the old prayers he is chanting. He weeps rather than sings the words. He mourns rather than prays. And our rabbi? The old rabbi? He has not changed at all. He was like the fallen snow when I saw him last, and today is like the fallen snow. He is different only in one trifling respect. His hands are trembling. And the rest of his body is also trembling, from old age, I should imagine. Asreal the Beadle—a Jew who had never had the least sign of a beard—would have been exactly the same man as once on a time, years before, if it were not for his teeth. He has lost every single tooth he possessed; and with his fallen-in cheeks, he now looks much more like a woman than a man. But for all that, he can still bang on the desk with his open hand. True, it is not the same bang as once on a time. Years ago, one was almost deafened by the noise of Asreal's hand coming down on the desk. Today, it is not like that at all. It seems that he has not any longer the strength he used to have. He was once a giant of a man.

Once on a time, years ago, I was happy in the little old synagogue; I remember that I felt happy without an end—without a limit! Here, in the little synagogue, years ago, my childish soul swept about with the angels I imagined were flying around the carved wings of the Holy Ark. Here, in the little synagogue, once on a time, with my father and all the other Jews, I prayed earnestly. And it gave me great pleasure, great satisfaction.

Jewish Children

And now, here I am again in the same old synagogue, praying with the same old congregation, just as once on a time, years ago. I hear the same Cantor singing the same melodies as before. And I am praying along with the congregation. But my thoughts are far from the prayers. I keep turning over the pages of my prayer-book idly, one page after the other. And—I am not to blame for it—I come upon the pages on which are printed the “Song of Songs.” And I read:

“Behold, thou art fair, my love; behold, thou are fair; thou hast dove’s eyes within thy locks.”

I should like to pray with the congregation, as they are praying, and as I used to pray, once on a time. But the words will not rise to my lips. I turn over the pages of my prayer-book, one after the other, and—I am not to blame for it—again I turn up the “Song of Songs,” at the fifth chapter.

“I am come into my garden, my sister, my spouse.”

And again:

“I have gathered my myrrh with my spice; I have eaten my honeycomb with my honey; I have drunk my wine with my milk.”

But what am I talking about? What am I saying? The garden is not mine. I shall not gather any myrrh, nor smell any spices. I shall eat no honey, and drink no wine. The garden is not my garden. Busie is not my betrothed. Busie is betrothed to some one else—to some one else, and not to me. . . . And there rages within me a hellish fire. Not against Busie. Not against anybody at all. No; only against myself alone. Surely!

This Night

How could I have stayed away from Busie for such a long time? How could I have allowed it—that Busie should be taken away from me, and given to some one else? Had she not written many letters to me, often, and given me to understand that she hoped to see me shortly? . . . Had I not myself promised to come home, and then put off going, from one Festival to another, so many times until, at last, Busie gave up writing to me?

“Good ‘Yom-Tov’! This is my son!”

That was how my father introduced me to the men of the congregation at the synagogue, after prayers. They examined me on all sides. They greeted me with, “Peace be unto you!” and accepted my greeting, in return, “Unto you be peace!” as if it were no more than their due.

“This is my son. . . .”

“That is your son? Here is a ‘Peace be unto you!’”

In my father’s words, “This is my son,” there were many shades of feeling, many meanings—joy, and happiness, and reproach. One might interpret the words as one liked. One might argue that he meant to say:

“What do you think? This is really my *son*.”

Or one might argue that he meant to say:

“Just imagine it—*this* is my son!”

I could feel for my father. He was deeply hurt. I had opposed his wishes. I had not gone his road, but had taken a road of my own. And I had caused him to grow old before his time. No; he had not

Jewish Children

forgiven me yet. He did not tell me this. But his manner saved him the trouble of explaining himself. I felt that he had not forgiven me yet. His eyes told me everything. They looked at me reproachfully from over his silver-rimmed spectacles, right into my heart. His soft sigh told me that he had not forgiven me yet—the sigh which tore itself, from time to time, out of his weak old breast. . . .

We walked home from the synagogue together, in silence. We got home later than any one else. The night had already spread her wings over the heavens. Her shadow was slowly lowering itself over the earth. A silent, warm, holy Passover night it was—a night full of secrets and mysteries, full of wonder and beauty. The holiness of this night could be felt in the air. It descended slowly from the dark blue sky. . . . The stars whispered together in the mysterious voices of the night. And on all sides of us, from the little Jewish houses came the words of the "*Haggadah*": "We went forth from Egypt on this night."

With hasty, hasty steps I went towards home, on this night. And my father barely managed to keep up with me. He followed after me like a shadow.

"Why are you flying?" he asked of me, scarcely managing to catch his breath.

Ah, father, father! Do you not know that I have been compared with "a roe or a young hart upon the mountains of spices"? . . . The time is long for me, father, too long. The way is long for me, father, too long. When Busie is betrothed to some one—to some one else and not to me, the hours and

This Night

the roads are too long for me. . . . I am compared with "a roe or a young hart upon the mountains of spices."

That is what I wanted to say to my father, in the words of the "Song of Songs." I did not feel the ground under my feet. I went towards home with hasty, hasty steps, on this night. My father barely managed to keep up with me. He followed after me like a shadow.

With the same "Good 'Yom-Tov'" which we had said on coming in from the synagogue on such a night as this, years ago, we entered the house on this night, my father and I.

With the same "Good 'Yom-Tov,' good year," with which my mother and Busie used to welcome us, on such a night as this, once on a time, years ago, they again welcomed us on this night, my father and me.

My mother, the Queen of the evening, was dressed in her royal robes of silk; and the Queen's Daughter, Busie, was dressed in her snow-white frock. They made the same picture which they had made, once on a time, years ago. They were not altered by as much as a hair. They were not different in a single detail.

As it had been years ago, so it was now. On this night, the house was full of grace. A peculiar beauty—a holy, festive, majestic loveliness descended upon our house. A holy, festive glamour hung about our house on this night. The white table-cloth was like driven snow. And everything which

Jewish Children

was on the table gleamed and glistened. My mother's Festival candles shone out of the silver candlesticks. The Passover wine greeted us from out the sparkling bottles. Ah, how pure, how simple the Passover cakes looked, peeping innocently from under their beautiful cover! How sweetly the horse-radish smiled to me! And how pleasant was the "mortar"—the mixture of crushed nuts and apples and wine which symbolized the mortar out of which the Israelites made bricks in Egypt, when they were slaves! And even the dish of salt-water was good to look upon.

Proudly and haughtily stood the throne on which my father, the King of the night, was going to recline. A glory shone forth from my mother's countenance, such as I always saw shining forth from it on such a night. And the Queen's Daughter, Busie, was entirely, from her head to her heels, as if she really belonged to the "Song of Songs." No! What am I saying? She was the "Song of Songs" itself.

The only pity was that the King's son was put sitting so far away from the Queen's Daughter. I remember that they once sat at the Passover ceremony in a different position. They were together, once on a time, years ago. One beside the other they sat. . . .

I remember that the King's Son asked his father "The Four Questions." And I remember that the Queen's Daughter stole from his Majesty the "*Afikomen*"— the pieces of Passover cake he had

This Night

hidden away to make the special blessing over. And I? What had I done then? How much did we laugh at that time! I remember that, once on a time, years ago, when the "Seder" was ended, the Queen had taken off her royal garment of silk, and the King had taken off his white robes, and we two, Busie and I, sat together in a corner playing with the nuts which my mother had given us. And there, in the corner, I told Busie a story—one of the fairy tales I had learnt at school from my comrade Sheika, who knew everything in the world. It was the story of the beautiful Queen's Daughter who had been taken from under the wedding canopy, bewitched, and put into a palace of crystal for seven years on end, and who was waiting for some one to raise himself up into the air by pronouncing the Holy Name, flying above the clouds, across hills, and over valleys, over rivers, and across deserts, to release her, to set her free.

But all this happened once on a time, years ago. Now the Queen's Daughter is grown up. She is big. And the King's Son is grown up. He is big. And we two are seated in such a way, so pitilessly, that we cannot even see one another. Imagine it to yourself! On the right of his majesty sat the King's Son. On the left of her majesty sat the Queen's Daughter! . . . And we recited the "Haggadah," my father and I, at the top of our voices, as once on a time, years ago, page after page, and in the same sing-song as of old. And my

Jewish Children

mother and Busie repeated the words after us, softly, page after page, until we came to the "Song of Songs." I recited the "Song of Songs" together with my father, as once on a time, years ago, in the same melody as of old, passage after passage. And my mother and Busie repeated the words after us, softly, passage after passage, until the King of the night, tired out, after the long Passover ceremony, and somewhat dulled by the four cups of raisin wine, began to doze off by degrees. He nodded for a few minutes, woke up, and went on singing the "Song of Songs." He began in a loud voice:

"Many waters cannot quench love." . . .

And I caught him up, in the same strain:

"Neither can floods drown it."

The recital grew softer and softer with us both, as the night wore on, until at last his majesty fell asleep in real earnest. The Queen touched him on the sleeve of his white robe. She woke him with a sweet, affectionate gentleness, and told him he should go to bed. In the meantime, Busie and I got the chance of saying a few words to one another. I got up from my place and went over close beside her. And we stood opposite one another for the first time, closely, on this night. I pointed out to her how rarely beautiful the night was.

"On such a night," I said to her, "it is good to go walking."

She understood me, and answered me, with a half-smile by asking:

This Night

“On such a night?” . . .

And I imagined that she was laughing at me. That was how she used to laugh at me, once on a time, years ago. . . . I was annoyed. I said to her:

“Busie, we have something to say to one another—we have much to talk about.”

“Much to talk about?” she replied, echoing my words.

And again I imagined that she was laughing at me. . . . I put in quickly:

“Perhaps I am mistaken? Maybe I have nothing at all to say to you now?”

These words were uttered with so much bitterness that Busie ceased from smiling, and her face grew serious.

“Tomorrow,” she said to me, “tomorrow we will talk.” . . .

And my eyes grew bright. Everything about me was bright and good and joyful. Tomorrow! Tomorrow we will talk! Tomorrow! Tomorrow! Tomorrow! . . .

I went over nearer to her. I smelt the fragrance of her hair, the fragrance of her clothes—the same familiar fragrance of her. And there came up to my mind the words of the “Song of Songs”:

“Thy lips, O my spouse, drop as the honeycomb: honey and milk are under thy tongue; and the smell of thy garments is like the smell of Lebanon.” . . .

Jewish Children

And all our speech this night was the same—without words. We spoke together with our eyes—with our eyes.

“Busie, good-night,” I said to her softly.

It was hard for me to go away from her. The one God in Heaven knew the truth—how hard it was.

“Good-night,” Busie made answer.

She did not stir from the spot. She looked at me, deeply perplexed, out of her beautiful blue “Song of Songs” eyes.

I said “good-night” to her again. And she again said “good-night” to me. My mother came in and led me off to bed. When we were in my room, my mother smoothed out for me, with her beautiful, snow-white hands, the white cover of my bed. And her lips murmured:

“Sleep well, my child, sleep well.”

Into these few words she poured a whole ocean of tender love—the love which had been pent up in her breast the long time I had been away from her. I was ready to fall down before her, and kiss her beautiful white hands.

“Good-night,” I murmured softly to her.

And I was left alone—all alone, on this night.

I was all alone on this night—all alone on this silent, soft, warm, early spring night.

I opened my window and looked out into the open, at the dark blue night sky, and at the shimmering

This Night

stars that were like brilliants. And I asked myself:

“Is it then true? Is it then true? . . .

“Is it then true that I have lost my happiness—lost my happiness for ever?

“Is it then true that with my own hands I took and burnt my wonderful dream-palace, and let go from me the divine Queen’s Daughter whom I had myself bewitched, once on a time, years ago? Is it then so? Is it so? Maybe it is not so? Perhaps I have come in time? ‘I am come into my garden, my sister, my spouse.’ ” . . .

I sat at the open window for a long time on this night. And I exchanged whispered secrets with the silent, soft, warm early spring night that was full—strangely full—of secrets and mysteries. . . .

On this night, I made a discovery—

That I loved Busie with that holy, burning love which is so wonderfully described in our “Song of Songs.” Big fiery letters seemed to carve themselves out before my eyes. They formed themselves into the words which I had only just recited, my father and I—the words of the “Song of Songs.” I read the carved words, letter by letter.

“Love is strong as death; jealousy is cruel as the grave: the coals thereof are coals of fire, which hath a most vehement flame.”

On this night, I sat down at my open window, and I asked of the night which was full of secrets and mysteries, that she should tell me this secret:

“Is it true that I have lost Busie for ever? Is it then true?” . . .

But she is silent—this night of secrets and

Jewish Children

mysteries. And the secret must remain a secret for me—until the morrow.

“Tomorrow,” Busie had said to me, “we will talk.”

Ah! Tomorrow we will talk! . . .

Only let the night go by—only let it vanish, this night!

This night! This night!

THE END



UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS-URBANA



3 0112 000902103